

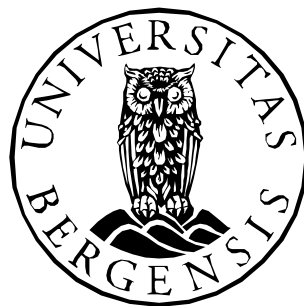
# **“But if you can’t fix it you got a stand it”**

## **Determinism in *Postcards* and Selected Wyoming Stories**

**by Annie Proulx**

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## Samandrag på norsk

Denne oppgåve er interessert i å undersøkje korleis determinisme, altså ideen om at mennesket er styrt av interne og eksterne krefter, formar karakterane i romanen *Postcards* og eit utval noveller frå novellesamlingane *Wyoming Stories*, skriven av den amerikanske forfattaren Annie Proulx. Det vert klart gjennom lesinga av tekstane at det er fleire ulike faktorar som påverkar desse karakterane og dermed formar og kontrollerer vala deira. Døme på slike faktorar er arv, miljø, geografiske faktorar, tilknytning til heimstad og ein skiftande historisk situasjon. Det sentrale spørsmålet i diskusjonen er i kva grad ein kan seie at landskap, geografi og stad formar karakterane i desse verka, og kor stor sjanse desse karakterane har til å forme sine egne liv.

Det at ein kan finne denne ideen om determinisme i Proulx sine verk gjer det mogeleg å kople forfattaren med sjangeren naturalisme. Naturalismen i Amerika har aldri heilt døydd ut, og det er mogeleg å spore ei litterær interesse for dei tema og emne naturalistane interesserte seg for frå slutten av 1800-talet og fram til i dag. Annie Proulx kan seiast å vere ein forfattar som er med å vidareføre denne interessa for naturalistiske idear i dag.

Det første kapitlet i oppgåva tar føre seg denne koplinga mellom Proulx og sjangeren naturalismen. Kapittel to og tre analyserar kva for konsekvensar dette har for mellom anna konstruksjonen av karakterar i romanen *Postcards* og eit utval av noveller. Det vert tydeleg at desse karakterane blir påverka av omgjevnadane, og at det er fleire faktorar som gjer at dei ikkje har kontroll over sin eigen skjebne.

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## Introduction

The air hisses and it is no local breeze but the great harsh sweep of wind from the turning of the earth. The wild country – indigo jags of mountain, grassy plain everlasting, tumbled stones like fallen cities, the flaring roll of sky – provokes a spiritual shudder. It is like a deep note that cannot be heard but is felt, it is like a claw in the gut.

Dangerous and indifferent ground: against its fixed mass the tragedies of people count for nothing although the signs of misadventure are everywhere. (Proulx, *Close Range* 107)

Annie Proulx is an American author who started publishing fiction late in life, at the age of 53. In a relatively short period of time she has published several novels and short story collections, in addition to several non-fictional works. She is an award-winning author, having been granted the Pulitzer Prize in Literature for her novel *The Shipping News* (1993) and a PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction for her first novel *Postcards* (1992). Proulx's best known work is probably the short story "Brokeback Mountain" from *Close Range* (1999), which was made into a movie in 2005. What is immediately striking in Proulx's writing is the very detailed description of landscape and of the characters' surroundings. What also seems to be a typical feature in much of her writing is the difficulty for many of her characters to succeed. Whether this is because of the immensity and harshness of their environment or other circumstances is a question for discussion, but it nevertheless seems as if these characters are up against forces and circumstances that thwart them and that contribute to their difficult lives. This tendency in Proulx's writing has been criticized, by both readers and critics, and Proulx has been accused of being too hard on her characters.

"But if you can't fix it you got a stand it," which I use in the title for this thesis, is from the short story "Brokeback Mountain" (301). The passage is part of a conversation

between the protagonists of the story, Jack and Ennis, two ranch hands that develop a deep emotional and sexual relationship while herding sheep on Brokeback Mountain. What they “got a stand” is the fact that they cannot be together and have to settle for occasional secret visits. The attitude expressed here is one of accepting one’s lot, an attitude arguably seen in much of Proulx’s writing. When something cannot be fixed, the only solution is to manage as best you can, and to live with the hand life has dealt you.

The epigraph above serves to illustrate not only Proulx’s unique style of writing but also a frequent theme and underlying idea in much of her fiction. Already in this fairly short quote, the power of landscape asserts itself. The landscape emerges as a character of its own when “the air hisses” and the country has gone wild. This country is “[d]angerous and indifferent ground,” indicating the attitude of the forces of nature towards the human beings that dwell here. The personification suggests that the landscape exerts powerful influence on characters, but it is an “indifferent” force, to whom “the tragedies of people count for nothing” (*Close Range* 107). As the passage also suggests, people have indeed tried to make it here, for “the signs of misadventure are everywhere,” but in the end, all that matters is the land. It is possible to see an underlying deterministic view in this short passage, and this idea of determinism is something I find in several works by Proulx. My thesis will examine different aspects of determinism in Proulx’s first novel, *Postcards*, and selected short stories from the Wyoming Stories collections, *Close Range* (1999), *Bad Dirt* (2004) and *Fine Just the Way It Is* (2008). The discussion will address questions such as the following: To what degree do landscape, geography and place play a part in determining what happens to the characters? To what extent are characters determined by heredity? How much room is left for human agency, and what possibilities do characters have to shape their own outcomes and destinies in the harsh and unforgiving environment Proulx presents in her writing?



Some critics, most notably Alan Weltzien and Hal Crimmel, have written on what they call “geographical determinism” in Proulx’s writing. Weltzien suggests that “Proulx’s geographical determinism, essential to understanding her fiction, explains the elevation of landscape imagery to a dominant, inhuman force, and a corresponding reduction of character to caricature” (100). Nonetheless, “geographical determinism” in Proulx’s writing has not been explored in more detailed analysis by critics, and my thesis will add new works to the existing discussion. More importantly, Weltzien and Crimmel provide little background for their idea of “geographical determinism,” which has a long background in the human sciences. Timothy R. Mahoney and Wendy J. Katz explain in their introduction to *Regionalism and the Humanities*: “geographical determinism in the humanities has typically defined a region by apparently neutral or objective criteria [...] and then given this environment credit for molding human activity and perception in certain ways” (xiii). They further observe that this is a simple definition, and argues that, “Many assume that people living in a place with a particular topography, climate, and resources will become conditioned by it and that, in some way – economic, psychological, or otherwise – it will become part of them and shape their behavior” (xiii). As my discussion aims to show, this kind of understanding of the relationship between individuals and their environment informs Proulx’s writing.

However, I will also be interested in looking more closely into how her description of character is inspired by determinism in general, beyond a focus on how characters are influenced by geography or the physical environment. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term “determinism” as: “The philosophical doctrine that human action is not free but necessarily determined by motives, which are regarded as external forces acting upon the will” (“Determinism,” def. 1). The aim of my discussion then, is to show that in Proulx’s

fiction, characters are determined by a number of “external forces,” and not just geography, which is the only aspect discussed by Weltzien and Crimmel.

The idea of “geographical determinism” in Proulx’s work may very well stem from the author herself. Proulx has stated that “I am something of a geographic determinist,” adding that her interest in place is rooted in her background as a historian (qtd. in Scanlon 102). During her doctoral training she gained “invaluable training for novel-writing,” and she says that “it set my approach to fiction forever, the examination of the lives of individuals against the geography and *longue durée* of events, that is that time and place are major determining factors in a human life” (Proulx, qtd. in Scanlon 101). Proulx’s “examination of the lives of individuals” will be an important focus in the discussions that follow. The “*longue durée* of events” links Proulx to the Annales school and emphasizes the importance of historical events for the lives of ordinary people.

In addition to looking at different aspects of determinism, this thesis will be focused on the characters’ strong connection with place and how this functions as a circumstance that greatly impacts the characters and reduces their choices. Julie Scanlon observes that Proulx’s “interest is partly that of human relationships with place” and continues to quote Proulx when she explains her interest in “exploring ‘the perception of home,’ a ‘very powerful force,’ and why people cling to a place against all odds” (104). This same interest is voiced again in the Acknowledgements to the short story collection *Close Range* where Proulx writes that, “In Wyoming not the least fantastic situation is the determination to make a living ranching in this tough and unforgiving place” (9). Here, Proulx recognizes that even when the place is “tough and unforgiving,” these characters are determined to stay.

The underlying emphasis on determinism in much of Proulx’s writing suggests that it is possible to consider these works as being a part of a continued revitalization of the literary mode of naturalism. I will therefore begin my thesis by arguing that Proulx’s writing echoes

the literary tradition of naturalism. Regarding Proulx's works as a part of a continued interest in naturalism is interesting for several reasons. First of all, the fact that there is still a widespread interest in the mode exemplifies Thomas G. Pavel's argument that "literary genres are most often unstable [...] they change with time [...]," and that "genres often possess an internal flexibility that makes them mobile and unpredictable at any given time" (201). The naturalistic period in American literature began in the late nineteenth century and included authors such as Frank Norris, Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser, to mention a few. As we will see in Chapter One, naturalism as a mode has been flexible, or "mobile," when it comes to adapting to the times. Pavel further argues that, "Genre helps us figure out the nature of a literary work [...]" (202), and this is particularly interesting when regarding Proulx as an author who shares some of the same ideas as the naturalists.

Reading Proulx's works as deterministic offers a different view on society and humans than we are used to in today's society. There seems to be a general idea today that as long as you set your mind to it, you can achieve anything. The underlying influence of the American Dream, the idea that as long as you work hard you can do anything, is reflected in the myriad of self-help books that offer a fool-proof way to success. Proulx's texts offer a different take on society. In her works it is not a given that if you work hard you will succeed. In fact, several of her texts offer a contradictory view. The characters assert themselves and try as best they can, but they still cannot get anywhere, strike it rich, or be happy and prosperous. There seems to be an underlying idea in much of Proulx's work that circumstances beyond the individual's control shape and determine how their lives turn out. This belief falls in line with the underlying idea that occupied many of the authors of the period of naturalism, namely the idea that forces and circumstances beyond human control shape human destiny and that there is little or no room left for individual agency and efforts for betterment.

The first chapter, then, will be a discussion of whether Proulx's writing can be said to share traits with the naturalistic tradition of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As mentioned, some critics have noted this affiliation between Proulx and naturalism before. However, more often than not, critics drop a line about naturalistic elements, but rarely follow up with more extensive analysis. This means that the idea that Proulx shares traits with the literary mode of naturalism seldom has any consequence for the interpretation of the texts. The first chapter is therefore meant to lay the groundwork for the analysis in the chapters that follow.

The second chapter will look at different aspects of determinism in *Postcards*. While the main focus will be on the protagonist Loyal Blood and his journey, the discussion will include comments on other members of the Blood family, and how their lives are determined by circumstances outside their control. The question of how much agency they have to change what life has in store for them will be central. *Postcards* has received fairly little critical attention since its publication, and to my knowledge no one has looked at the novel in light of aspects such as geographical determinism or determinism of place. As will be clear from my discussion, the novel also raises several other issues, such as changing socio-economic conditions, the power of heredity and the ideology of the American Dream.

In the third and last chapter I will extend the discussion of determinism by looking at several short stories from Proulx's collections of Wyoming Stories. These short stories are all set in Wyoming, and the harsh realities of Wyoming are depicted with great detail and attentiveness. Determinism and connection to place will be important focal points in this chapter, as well as the effects of a changing socio-economic situation. A recurring question will be: Why would anyone stay in a place that offers them so little in return for their hard work? The relevance of the idea of "geographical determinism" for these Wyoming Stories will be central for the discussion.

## Chapter One

### Annie Proulx: “something of a geographic determinist”?

Naturalism “refuses to die” in America (Willard Thorp, qtd. in Pizer, *Twentieth-Century* ix)

While naturalism represented an important literary movement in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, Keith Newlin observes that “[s]ince 1980, more than two dozen books about the subject have appeared, and articles about its principle authors [...] continue to be published in leading journals” (3). This shows that the interest in naturalism as a movement and mode has not disappeared. Newlin further observes:

A raft of articles and books have appeared that trace the continuing presence of naturalism in authors as diverse as Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton, Upton Sinclair, Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, Richard Wright, Joyce Carol Oates, Cormac McCarthy, and Don DeLillo. (3)

In this chapter I will argue that also writings by Annie Proulx, more specifically *Postcards* and her collections of Wyoming Stories, can be said to contribute to the revival of this interest in naturalism. The discussion that follows aims to show that Proulx’s writings echo some of the main narrative elements often found in naturalistic fiction. In other words, I will argue that Annie Proulx is yet another author that is intrigued by the subject matter and philosophical ideas of literary naturalism, and that her writings present another example of how ideas central to naturalism continue to flourish and “refuses to die” (Thorp, qtd. in Pizer, *Twentieth-Century* ix). However, I will first look into the difficulty of categorizing Annie Proulx’s writings, since several critics have come up with different answers to this question.

### **Annie Proulx's "idiosyncratic" Style**

Proulx has expressed that she does not think of herself as having a personal style of writing, in the sense of narrative strategies, mood or use of language. In an interview with Christopher Cox in the *Paris Review*, she says: "I don't think about it. If I have a style, that's fine. But I couldn't say what it is. I don't consciously cultivate a style. It is just an outgrowth of who I am." She is, however, very clear when stating that "[p]lace and history are central to the fiction I write" and that she always has a specific setting in mind (Proulx, "An Interview" 79). It is interesting that Proulx does not think of her own writing as having a distinctive style, when her specific way of writing and her choice of subject matter have been commented on so much by critics. The idea that environment shapes Proulx's stories is prominent in most of the critical work written on her work. However, critics do not seem to agree on how to identify or categorize her works, and her writing has been categorized as belonging to many different literary modes or styles. She has been called a writer of realism, postmodernism, modernism, and regionalism. Margaret E. Johnson, for instance, argues in "Proulx and the Postmodern Hyperreal" that Proulx's writing can be read as postmodern: "The places themselves are realistic in description, but are also more than that: they enter the realm of the hyperreal, an element of the postmodern" (25). She explains that Proulx depicts "landscapes that are simultaneously realistic and extreme, that seem simultaneously rooted in the world as well as imaginary" (26), and in *Close Range* and *Postcards* she finds examples of "hyperreality that is present in the dramatically realistic and natural environment" (26).

Alex Hunt is not as firm as Johnson when placing Proulx's writing, but he also suggests that Proulx could be categorized as a postmodernist, stating that her writing explores the "rural country and hinterland existence [...] through experimental postmodern styles and narrative strategies" ("Introduction" 1). Hunt argues that Proulx's writing can be seen as "a new kind of critical regionalism within postmodern fiction" and deems that this is Proulx's

“most important contribution to contemporary American fiction” (“Introduction” 2).

According to Hunt there is a certain duality or tension in Proulx’s works, as there is “an insistence on reality and a non-realist aesthetic,” and at the same time “a postmodern style and a critique of postmodernism” (“Introduction” 2). Hunt insists that Proulx’s representation of place “addresses... [a] postmodern skepticism toward the contemporary viability of place and region,” which makes him characterize Proulx’s writing as “idiosyncratic” (1). Hunt’s arguments stand in contrast to Johnson’s view, especially when he argues that Proulx’s “readers are forcefully reminded that regions and places remain *real*, distinct, different – and, ultimately, that the distinctions and differences are worth fighting for” (1). Johnson, however, leans on Jean Baudrillard’s definition of “the postmodern,” which, as Johnson sees it, “is defined in part by this absence of an original source; instead we are living in a hyperreal world, one where we have copies of reality without reality itself” (25). Johnson’s argument that Proulx’s use of landscape “seem[s] simultaneously rooted in the world as well as imaginary” (26) does not correlate with Hunt’s arguments nor with statements made by Proulx herself, who frequently insists on her use of real places, events and people in her stories.<sup>1</sup>

Because of her focus on real places and regions, Proulx has been categorized as a regionalist writer. In the quote cited above, Hunt uses the term “critical regionalism,” which is interesting as it points to a different take on what it means to be a regional writer. Hunt argues: “Although a strong sense of region or place is an undeniable attribute of Proulx’s writing, she has an uneasy relationship to regionalism” (“The Ecology of Narrative” 184). He further contends that this “uneasy relationship” lies in an ambivalent relationship to region and a duality when depicting these regions. He explains that at the same time as Proulx is

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<sup>1</sup> There are short stories from the Wyoming Stories that obviously break with the realist mode. Some of these stories, for instance, “The Hellhole” and “I’ve Always Loved This Place,” could be categorized as “magical realism.” These will not be the focus of this thesis, but I acknowledge that there are stories that do not fit with my argument and aim.

“smitten with unique, edgy places and rugged, stubborn communities, [...] her representation of them often highlights regional stereotypes in a manner that seems at times harsh and satirical” (184). Proulx has often been criticized by the locals of the regions she has chosen for her setting, and she explains in an interview conducted by Cox: “Most rural people are angry when I write about their places because they’re not presented in great glowing hosannas. [...] The same way the Wyoming stories infuriated people because it wasn’t all about wonderful things” (“Annie Proulx, The Art of Fiction”). This shows that the regions Proulx writes about are not all that willing to consider her writings as part of their region. Hunt gives his own opinion and argues that Proulx “succeeds as critical regionalist in taking place seriously, but she is also critical of her own position with respect to regional culture” (“The Ecology of Narrative” 193). Proulx is not of the places she writes about, and this creates a distance in her works, which makes her able to have an outsider perspective on the places she renders and on the people who live in them. Hunt further argues that as critical regionalist, Proulx is “using regional materials and cosmopolitan methods to address both local and global concerns” (193). Throughout this thesis it is possible to see that the changes and fates of the locals depicted in Proulx’s writing could be said to affect people elsewhere and have meaning on a global scale.

All fiction written by Annie Proulx is grounded in setting and place, and in interviews she repeatedly stresses that for her, the writing process involves meticulous research. Proulx herself, like many of her critics, emphasizes the importance of setting: “I begin with the place and what happened there *before* I fill notebooks with drawings and descriptions of rocks, water, people, names” (“An Interview” 83). Her stories spring out of places that are real, the historical events that shape her stories are real events, and the descriptions of the landscape come from seeing it and living in it. Because of this particular writing process, Proulx has been claimed to be a writer of realism. Julie Scanlon argues that the writings of Annie Proulx



“exemplif[y] the contemporary desire for realism. Proulx consciously presents herself as a storyteller who bases her fictions on facts” (90). Scanlon provides several reasons why Proulx can be considered a realist writer, amongst them her very detailed research methods and the specific locations of her stories.

Categorizing Proulx’s works is indeed a difficult task, as she can be said to share traits with many different literary modes. Rather than considering Proulx as a realist or postmodernist, and without discounting how other critics have categorized her work, I will argue that she shares traits with the literary tradition of naturalism and that this adds to the “idiosyncrasy” of her mode of writing, to borrow Hunt’s term.

### **The Tradition of Naturalism in American Literature**

Defining a literary mode of fiction is difficult, and defining literary naturalism has proved to be troublesome. Some critics argue that naturalism is merely an outgrowth of realism and that therefore the difference between realism and naturalism are minimal. Gregg Crane, for instance, argues that: “The distinction between naturalism and realism [...] does not represent a fundamental difference on the definitional level of novelistic form as much as a trend in the themes and subject matter” (162). Abrams and Harpham define naturalism as “an even more accurate depiction of life than realism.” They further argue that “it is a mode of fiction that was developed by a school of writers in accordance with a particular philosophical thesis” (303-04). This coincides with Eric Carl Link’s observation: “Just as naturalist theory itself is a scientific and philosophical sprawl radiating outward from a Darwinian code, so too American literary naturalism as an aesthetic movement is one with an identifiable core, in effect, but whose edges are not clearly defined [...]” (72). Link goes on to argue that works of naturalistic fiction “bear some family resemblance – for instance, through their portrayal of human nature as circumscribed by external forces” even if they do not share any formal

literary conventions (72). He further states that “there was no fixed definition within the literary community in the late nineteenth century over the meaning of naturalism as it applied to literary productions” (79). My aim is not to try to define the movement, but I will use this ambiguity to my advantage when arguing that works by Annie Proulx share some of these “family resemblance[s]” with works of naturalism.

The largest impact on naturalism was the advances in the sciences, and particularly the observations made by Charles Darwin in *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859) and the theories developed in its wake. Darwin argued that human beings descended from lower animals. Herbert Spencer furthered this argument and stated that in the human sphere, like the animal sphere, the strongest survived in a continuous struggle for existence. Link observes that the science of the 1870s and 1880s “pushed literature in two directions, both deemed ‘naturalistic’” (75). He states that one of the directions involved a “detailed study of nature,” with reference to the accurate description of characters’ surroundings. The other direction, which tended “toward philosophical speculation about the position of humankind within nature” (75), had a stronger bearing on American literary naturalism. Accordingly, Pizer observes that naturalism could be considered an outgrowth of realism and could be explained as “social realism laced with the idea of determinism” (Pizer, *Twentieth-Century* x). Humans are more limited in their choices than in works of realism. Naturalism also added new elements into the mix, mostly drawn from the natural sciences. For instance, naturalists saw human beings as little more than animals, controlled by instinct and environment. Donna M. Campbell argues that the “standard characteristics of naturalism” included “a frank treatment of sexuality, the primacy of heredity [...] and the power of natural and mechanical forces to determine the course of human lives” (229-30). Humans are, according to the naturalist, a creature determined by his or her surroundings, environment and

heredity. Consequently, it is an inescapable fact that humans have no free will and that all choices are, in effect, made for them by external and internal forces.

Furst and Skrine argue that there is a distinctive difference between the naturalists in the United States and in Europe. Naturalists in Europe, and especially in France under the leadership of Emile Zola, had a very literal approach to science, believing that naturalists should be “neutral analysts of observed facts” (Furst and Skrine 28). Likewise, Pizer observes that writers of naturalism should be concerned with writing the absolute truth, and “truth was achieved by depicting life in accord with scientific laws and methods [...]” (*Twentieth-Century* 4). Naturalism in France was much more concerned with ideology and philosophy than its overseas counterpart, and naturalists in Europe were often united by manifestos and a certain set of rules. However, due to the strict regulations imposed on the naturalists, the movement soon thwarted itself. To study people, their environment and the outcome of their situation the same way one would conduct a scientific study turned out to stifle the creative artist, making their works almost unreadable. This, according to Furst and Skrine, eventually led to the “death” of naturalism in Europe (30-31). This situation differs quite drastically from the American version of naturalism, and its outcome.

The American form of naturalism can be said to be a milder version of its European counterpart. As Pizer observes: “The genius of American naturalism thus lies in the looseness and freedom with which American writers dealt with the gospel according to a European prophet” (*Twentieth-Century* 5). Instead of focusing solely on the ideology and philosophy of the European naturalists, American naturalists decided to focus on “depicting truthfully all ranges of life” (5). Naturalists in America still adhered to the same philosophical core as in Europe, “a sense of man more circumscribed than conventionally acknowledged” (6). Writers believed that their subject matter and characters, often the poor, the lower classes, the less educated and less fortunate, were forced or pushed by outside forces and driven by inner

forces they had no control over. At the same time, the American naturalists showed “compassion for the fallen, hope of betterment for the lot of the oppressed [and] bitterness toward the remediable which lies unremedied [...]” (6). Hence there is a certain duality in many works of American naturalism and instead of just giving an account of deterministic forces at work, authors induce hope and a sense of freedom. This does not necessarily mean that their protagonists ultimately have control over their own lives. What finally shape and control characters’ fates are forces and circumstance outside their control. As Pizer observes, “The naturalistic tragic hero is a figure whose potential for growth is evident but who fails to develop because of the circumstances of his life” (6). This duality can be said to be one of the key differences between the American and the European version of naturalism, and, as Pizer argues, the difference that ensured that the American version did not die out.

According to Pizer, then, this difference between the European and American form of naturalism is what made naturalism a more influential genre in America than in Europe. Naturalistic works were often viewed as sordid, depressing and too harsh on its characters, and the naturalistic novel is known for attacking traditional values, such as characters’ moral sense and responsibility for their actions. As humans are controlled by outside forces, they cannot be held responsible for their actions. This, according to Pizer, is a paradox in the history of American literary naturalism: “it has been one of the most persistent and vital strains in American fiction” at the same time that it has been scolded for its subject matter and its bleak look of man and environment (*Twentieth-Century* ix).

Naturalism in America has “continued to flourish,” despite the negative critiques it has often received. It is arguable that a reason for its success is that the movement has been, in Pizer’s view, far from “static or monolithic in theme since its origin in the 1890s” (“Introduction” 13). He argues:

Indeed, one of the striking characteristics of the movement has been its adaptability to fresh currents of idea and expression in each generation while maintaining a core of naturalistic preoccupations. The nature of this core is not easy to describe, given the dynamic flexibility and amorphousness of naturalism as a whole in America, but it appears to rest on the relationship between a restrictive social and intellectual environment and the consequent impoverishment both of social opportunity and of the inner life. (“Introduction” 13)

If, as Pizer suggests, the naturalistic movement has moved through generations, and only kept a certain amount of core values to be called naturalistic, this opens up for the question of whether it is possible to argue that contemporary authors can still be said to write in the naturalistic tradition, or at least share traits with it. Even though the subject matter or setting of a novel is not a direct parallel to that of “original” naturalists such as Norris, Crane and Dreiser, who often wrote about the lower classes in city slums or urban settings, a novel can still be argued to share naturalistic impulses if the core values are apparent. Pizer further observes:

Naturalism thus seems to appeal to each generation of American writers as a means of dramatizing “hard times” in America – hard times in the sense both of economic decline and of spiritual malaise, with each generation also incorporating into this continuing impulse or tradition of naturalism the social and intellectual concerns of that age. (“Introduction” 14)

Pizer uses Edith Wharton, among others, as an example of an author that is now viewed as a naturalist writer, at least to some degree. Rather than being set in the working-class slums her stories are usually set in an upper-class society, but “because of her central theme of the

entrapment of women within social codes and taboos” she is increasingly viewed as a naturalist (“Introduction” 14).

Pizer seeks to argue that naturalism has resurfaced on the literary scene several times after the first period of naturalism, starting in the late nineteenth century. He contends that it is possible to find elements of naturalism in the 1930s, with authors like James T. Farrell, John Dos Passos and John Steinbeck, and he further argues for a resurfacing of the tradition in the late 1940s and early 1950s with authors like Norman Mailer, William Styron and Saul Bellow.<sup>2</sup> Pizer observes that the naturalistic concerns of the 1890s, “the tragic nature of life because of the determining forces of experience, and the extent to which affirmative humanistic value and meaning could still be found despite man’s conditioned life,” are present in works of fiction in the 1930s and late 1940s and early 1950s (*Twentieth-Century* 151). In his postscript, Pizer states that it is impossible to “predict the future of naturalism in America” (*Twentieth-Century* 152). He carefully points to Joyce Carol Oates and suggests future studies on “the transfer of some of the interests and techniques of literary naturalism to such forms as the film [...] and documentary narrative” (*Twentieth-Century* 152). Keith Newlin likewise points to a continued interest in naturalism as a movement. Adding Proulx to the canon of authors already considered as influenced by the naturalist mode only emphasizes its continued interest.

Mark Asquith, the author of a reader’s guide to “Brokeback Mountain” and *Postcards*, notes Proulx’s affiliation with naturalism when he observes: “Proulx’s scope remains epic, placing her in the company of naturalist writers such as Steinbeck [...] and Frank Norris” (24). Aitor Ibarrola also argues that Proulx’s writing, specifically her short story collection *Fine Just the Way It Is*, can be viewed as naturalistic. He states that, “The detailed representations [sic.] and pessimistic determinism that became the staple ingredients of this

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<sup>2</sup> For a full discussion, see Donald Pizer’s *Twentieth-Century American Literary Naturalism. An Interpretation*.

literary trend are very much present in her 2008 collection *Fine Just the Way It is*” (132). This statement emphasizes both the naturalists’ tendency to depict events with even greater detail than the realists, and also the interest in ideas about determinism. The argument that Proulx seems to share traits with the naturalistic literary mode is not entirely new, other critics too have mentioned this affiliation. However, as in the case of Asquith and Ibarrola, this link between Proulx and naturalism has more often than not only been mentioned in passing, and not supported with detailed analysis of her writings. The “pessimistic determinism,” to borrow Ibarrola’s words, expressed in her texts offers a unique view on life, and as mentioned in the introduction, reading Proulx’s fiction focused on traits shared with the literary mode of naturalism has not yet been explored in any detail. The discussion that follows will look into how various aspects of naturalism work in Proulx’s texts.

### **Naturalistic Elements in Annie Proulx’s Writings**

Proulx’s interest in naturalism seems to be intimately tied up with an interest in history. Proulx explains in an interview that her “stories are informed by the past,” and that “[t]he present is always pasted on layers of the past” (“An Interview” 79-80). As already mentioned, Proulx is a historian by trade, and this is something she has brought to her writing to the extent that most of what she writes is infused with history in some way. In *Postcards*, for instance, we follow Loyal Blood and the rest of his family through decades of changes and historic events. *Postcards* registers social and historical changes in rural America, among them modernization of agriculture, urbanization and commercialization, thus commenting on a changed and perhaps lost way of life. These changes can be seen as determining factors in shaping the lives of Loyal and the rest of the Blood family throughout the novel.

Proulx has stated that while she was studying history she was influenced by the French Annales school, and particularly their research methods. As she explains, the Annales school

“pioneered minute examination of the lives of ordinary people through account books, wills, marriage and death records, farming and crafts techniques, the development of technologies,” and this way of conducting research conforms to Proulx’s own methods of researching prior to writing (“An Interview” 80). When asked how she gathers her information she explains:

I read manuals of work and repair, books of manners, dictionaries of slang, city directories, lists of occupational titles, geology, regional weather, botanists’ plant guides, local histories, newspapers. I visit graveyards, collapsing cotton gins, photograph barns and houses, roadways. I listen to ordinary people speaking with one another in bars and stores, in laundromats. I read bulletin boards, scraps of paper I pick up from the ground. (“An Interview” 83)

A connection can be made here between the insistence on reality and the interest in the lives of “ordinary people” in Proulx’s research methods and the naturalists’ focus on accurately depicting the lives of real and ordinary people. Proulx’s texts are as detailed in their representation of the characters’ lives, surroundings and occupations as one would expect from a naturalistic writer. There are several examples of the results of Proulx’s meticulous research method in *Postcards*. For instance, in addition to working on the family farm, Loyal had set up a trapline, to trap fox and make money on the fur. After Loyal leaves, his brother Dub is asked to continue his work. After his saying “you don’t begin to know about old Loyal’s traps and trapline. I couldn’t do what he done with the traps in a million years” follows a three-page description of the specific ways and methods Loyal has for trapping animals (*Postcards* 51-53). The accurate details in Proulx’s rendering of fur trapping suggest thorough research. While Proulx has voiced her attraction to the *Annales* school in several interviews, in “The Influence of the *Annales* School on Annie Proulx’s Geographical Imagination,” Stéphanie Durrans argues that Proulx’s “methods of investigation prior to writing a novel or a short story undoubtedly recall the *Annales*’s fundamental principles: the



diversification of sources and in-the-field explorations” (13). These “in-the-field explorations” are particularly relevant for Proulx, as she spends a lot of time and energy on research for her projects. This can clearly be seen in the quotation above, where she describes her research method of filling notebooks with descriptions of rocks and water.

Writing about American naturalism, June Howard observes that people living in “the late nineteenth and early twentieth century [...] felt themselves living in a perilous time, a period of change and uncertainty” and that “[n]aturalism is a literary form that struggles to accommodate that sense of discomfort and danger” (386). Living in “a period of change and uncertainty” is a recurring theme also in most of Proulx’s writing. In *Postcards*, the lives of the Blood family are shaped by changes and uncertainties that have severe consequences for their family, their farm and their surroundings. Mink is reluctant to change and modernize at the pace that the world around him is changing. Loyal’s world changes when he has to give up his dream and his old life, and instead he drifts along aimlessly, trying occupation after occupation, never able to settle down and make a living for himself. His jobs are all connected to the land and landscape, and as he drifts from job to job, the reader is presented with “observations of an America in which the little man and traditional working practices are under threat” (Asquith 45). As we will see in the next chapter, Loyal ventures into several different vocations, all considered to be either dying out, or obsolete.

While Howard argues that, “an investigation of naturalism [...] doubly entails an investigation of its historical moment” (386), Proulx has said that “I frequently focus on the period when everything – the traditional economic base, the culture, the family and the clan links – begins to unravel,” and about *Postcards* specifically, she has stated that the novel is about “what happens when a region has only one economic base and it goes under” (“An Interview” 84). This affirms her interest in history and the changes brought upon society and the people living in it, and this is a feature she shares with naturalistic writers. The quotations

above show Proulx's interest in the disruption of family and society. In both *Postcards* and some of the Wyoming Stories, Proulx writes about regions with only one economic base and the destiny of her characters when that economic base fails. Pizer argues, naturalism "seems to appeal to each generation of American writers as a means of dramatizing 'hard times' in America" ("Introduction" 14), and Proulx depicts such hard times in *Postcards*. Proulx states in an interview with Christopher Cox in the *Paris Review* that most of her "novels are about edgy social situations" and that *Postcards* "was about dispossessed people on Vermont hill farms" ("Annie Proulx, The Art of Fiction").

Depicting hard times is also a frequent theme in her Wyoming Stories collections. Most of her stories are centered on small towns or rural districts in Wyoming, where the environment seems to do all it can to make people's lives difficult and unmanageable. Some of her stories span decades, and "cover broad swaths of Wyoming history, from the earliest trappers and settlers to the ranchers and game wardens and oil men who populate the state today" ("Annie Proulx, The Art of Fiction"). Her themes often center on the disintegration of rural life in Wyoming, especially cowboys and ranchers who lose their livelihood or find it difficult to succeed because of socio-historical changes, their own shortcomings, or the often overwhelming and difficult environment of Wyoming. She explains in an interview with *Paris Review* that what interests her are "[t]he fringe edges of dissolution and construction of societies. For me, mostly dissolution. Change. How the shape-shifting happens" ("Annie Proulx, The Art of Fiction"). These are all examples of how it is possible to see a similar interest in the subject matter in Proulx's writing and much of the writing of naturalists.

In some of Proulx's texts, we can see that people are shaped by both internal and external forces outside their control, which again can be argued to echo naturalism. Commenting on the short story "The Lonely Coast," Alan Weltzien argues that "[w]hether through sexual desire, the terrain, or the weather, they [the characters] are controlled more

than they control, and usually do not live as they wish” (106). Weltzien even goes on to say that many of Proulx’s stories “inscribe what could be called a neo-Naturalism, wherein environmental forces (landscape and weather) larger than individuals trace the trajectories of their lives, marking and reducing their choices” (101). I have chosen to focus on other short stories than the ones Weltzien comments on, or to go further into details than he does, and in addition to the controlling forces mentioned above I will add that place, and a connection to place, determines and controls the characters.

As evident in the quotation above, Weltzien, among others, argues that one could talk of “neo-Naturalism” with regards to Proulx’s writing. The term brings attention to the fact that the naturalistic period belongs to the past. It makes little sense to argue that Proulx is adopting the mode of literary naturalism, she is rewriting it. What is important is that it is possible to see that some of the interests and ideas characteristic of the naturalist writer can also be traced in her writing. Alex Hunt has also noted this underlying belief in determinism in Proulx’s fiction, and writes that “[f]or those whose economic class and lack of education prevent escape, and for those whose blood, Proulx seems to suggest, is too strongly tied to place to be denied, geography shapes and limits characters’ lives” (4). This shows that critics have noted the underlying belief in some of her fiction that people may be limited in their choices because of circumstances and forces outside their control. She seems to be intrigued by many of the philosophical ideas that also occupied the naturalists, even though her writings also bear traces typical of her own period of time, and as we have seen, Proulx’s style can also be characterized as postmodernist.

Particularly interesting with regards to Annie Proulx is what several critics, and Proulx, calls “geographical determinism.” As already noted, the term appears to have been introduced by Proulx herself. In an article written for the book *Brokeback Mountain, Story to Screenplay*, Proulx provides some additional comments on the term:

As a student of history and a writer of fiction my interest has focused on social and economic changes in rural communities – Vermont, Newfoundland, Texas, Wyoming. I am something of a geographic determinist, believing that regional landscapes, climate and topography dictate local cultural traditions and kinds of work, and thereby the events on which my stories are built. Landscape is central to this rural fiction. (“Getting Movied” 129)

Proulx has voiced this interest in several interviews, and has said that “[g]eography, geology, climate, weather, the deep past, immediate events, shape the characters and partly determine what happens to them” (“An Interview” 79). This interest is also commented on by critics, and Hunt argues that “[t]he main reason that Proulx’s landscapes go far beyond memorable word-pictures is that she foregrounds the geography – land forms, environmental facts, weather, and so on – and shows human individuals and communities as subject to the conditions of that geography” (“Introduction” 3-4). What is important to draw out from these quotes is that landscape and geography are in the foreground of Proulx’s writing and that these are factors that contribute to shape, control and force the characters’ lives.

Proulx herself emphasizes the importance of landscape and how it has a formative influence on the lives of rural people. In the essay “Dangerous Ground,” Proulx offers her own specification of what she means by the word landscape: “Landscape is geography, geology, archaeology, astrophysics, agronomy, agriculture, the violent character of the atmosphere, climate [...] (10). Parts of this thesis will look into how this particular strand of determinism works in Proulx’s text and what consequences this has for her characters and her stories. As I will argue in Chapters Two and Three, this geographical determinism works as a force that shapes and limits the lives of the characters in *Postcards* and the Wyoming Stories.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines geography as follows:

2.a. The field of study concerned with the physical features of the earth and its atmosphere, and with human activity as it affects and is affected by these, including the distribution of populations and resources and political and economic activities [...].

2.b. The geographical features or topography of a place or region; a place or region, or terrain, as characterized by such features. ("Geography," def. 2.a. and 2.b.)

These definitions suggest that "human activity" not only "affects" but also "is affected" by geography, in addition to pointing at the geographical features of a regions that are vital for existing and living in that region. In my reading of *Postcards* and the Wyoming Stories, the characters are more affected by the geography, understood to include landscape, weather, climate and topography, than they themselves affect that same geography. As we will see, some characters indeed do try to change their lot. Some try to lessen the effects of their environment, others try to change occupation after their current ones fails them. These can be seen as examples of human agency, but it becomes clear that in the end, it is not enough.

Proulx's insistence on geography in her writing also coincides with her attraction to the Annales school. Durrans argues that "[t]he *Annales* widened the historian's horizon to include such new centers of interest as population, demography, ways of life, nature and landscape" (12). This interest in nature and landscape is so prominent in Proulx's writing, that critics have argued, as Durrans does, that "landscape holds the status of a full-fledged character in her work" (14). Durrans observes that Annie Proulx's "ambivalent position between determinism and possibilism when retracing man's unrelenting fight against his environment" is rooted in the understanding of the theories and practices of this direction of historical studies (11). Durrans explains that the Annales school took inspiration from a "new school of geography that came to be known as the Vidalian tradition" (13), named after Pierre Vidal de la Blache, a geographer by trade and historian by training, who argued for a "human

geography” that “takes the land – and not man – as its starting-point” (Durrans 14). Vidal’s work was continued in the field of history by Fernard Braudel, who believed that “history could not be understood independently from its geographic setting” (Braudel, qtd. in Durrans 16). However, there was a difference in Braudel and Vidal’s argument, which Durrans argues is crucial for the understanding of Proulx’s writing. Braudel believed that “man was only a prisoner of the environment and of its contingencies, with no room to maneuver whatsoever,” whereas Vidal was not as pessimistic in his view, and “in his eyes, man’s relationship to his physical environment was not under the sway of mere deterministic forces” (17). When Durrans argues that, “This dialectic between determinism and possibilism underlies all of Proulx’s work” (17), she in fact points to a feature that scholars like Pizer deem to be characteristic of American naturalist writing, as discussed above. As already noted naturalism in America displays some ambivalence towards the idea of determinism. Pizer observes that, “The naturalistic novelist is willing to concede that there are fundamental limitations to a man’s freedom but he is unwilling to concede that man is thereby stripped of all value” (*Twentieth Century* 10).

The same ambivalence in Proulx’s writing is noted by Ibarrola when he argues that even though Proulx’s characters face the “overwhelming and oppressive nature of the physical elements,” they still “show some courage and personal worth that will set them apart from the insect-like creatures we meet in the fiction of writers such as Stephen Crane or Frank Norris” (133). However, whereas Ibarrola uses this as an argument against Proulx’s affiliation with naturalism, the fact that Proulx gives her characters “some courage and personal worth,” aligns her with the American version of naturalism. Even if some of her characters, in the end may achieve some degree of success, it is never fully their own choice.

Proulx affirms that she is particularly interested in writing about changes in people’s lives, a feature important to many naturalists. Proulx also shares with the naturalistic mode a

belief that people are, to a degree, controlled by both external and internal forces. These features coincide with the widespread interest in naturalism as a literary mode discussed above. The idea that it is possible to “trace the continuing presence of naturalism” in new authors serves to show that the interest in the mode is still very much alive today (Newlin 3).

In an article on landscape writing in America, Proulx writes: “Landscape description was once an important element in novels not only to give meaning and shape to the story but for its strange ability to carry the reader deeply and intimately inside the fiction, to establish the fiction’s truth” (“Dangerous Ground” 6). This, Proulx argues, is a trend that existed up until recently. She singles out the first half of the twentieth century as a time period focused on the “American landscape novel.” Her characterization of the landscape novel actually fits quite well into how her own works are perceived, and she in fact could arguably be called a landscape writer. She writes:

In most of these novels landscape seemed fixed and immutable, ordering the lives of the characters who moved within it, forcing the events of the story. [...] In such novels the story cannot be removed from the place any more than the unfolding of our lives can be pulled from the places where we live and work. (7)

Indeed, a “fixed and immutable” landscape that forces “the events of the story” fit well with elements from Proulx’s writing. It is also possible to see a link to naturalism in the idea that the events of a story are shaped and forced by landscape. Proulx further contends that landscape description is now a feature more common to non-fiction rather than novels: “The trend in current intellectual observation and thinking is to recognize the complexities, the stunningly intricate linkages, of the natural world with humans in it. That interest has not much stirred American fiction writers” (“Dangerous Ground” 13). Again, this is an interest that very much stirs Proulx, and this can be seen both in her fiction, and in comments she has made herself about the importance of landscape in her writing.

About writing today, Proulx adds that the “kind of deep landscape novel, in which the story that unfolds can only happen because of *where* it happens, is rarely written” (7). It is interesting to see Proulx writing about landscape fiction as something lost, when her own work can be categorized as belonging to this type of fiction. You cannot remove her Wyoming stories from Wyoming any more than you can change the setting of *Postcards* without changing the story. This could probably be said about all her fiction. You cannot remove it from its place, and as Eudora Welty argues in “Place in Fiction”: “Every story would be another story, and unrecognizable as art, if it took up its characters and plot and happened somewhere else” (122). Proulx’s emphasis on landscape and environment is probably one of the most commented-on aspects of her writing. As other critics have noted, and as I will look more closely into in the next chapters, “landscape” that seems “fixed and immutable” (Proulx, “Dangerous Ground” 7), is very much present in writing by Annie Proulx.

Proulx’s insistence on geography makes the connection to place unavoidable. Proulx’s use of geography to create a strong sense of place can be argued to be a contributing factor in keeping her stories real and grounded, and serves as a link between her style of writing and the mode of naturalism. Welty writes that “fiction depends for its life on place. Location is the crossroads of circumstance, the proving ground of ‘What happened? Who’s here? Who’s coming’ – and that is the heart’s field” (118). She further emphasizes that “place has a good deal to do with making the characters real [...] and keeping them so” (121). What is most real in Proulx’s writing is her rendering of landscape, environment and geography. Some of these characters are so rooted to their homes that they cannot leave, and because of this connection they try to make the best out of living in these harsh conditions. Hunt argues that “characters who for whatever reason cannot leave their places must resign themselves as best they can to its rigors” (“Introduction” 4). This is well exemplified by Jewell Blood’s statement in



*Postcards* that “[w]hat can’t be cured must be endured” (*Postcards* 198; qtd. in Hunt 4). Hunt further argues that Proulx, through her writing, insists “that human cultures must be understood as products of interactions with place” (“Introduction” 8). These interactions with place are as much determining as they are freeing.

Place, or a connection to place, functions as a conditioning circumstance on the characters and determines what happens to them. Place, or the geography of place, limits and shapes the society that these characters are a part of, and as a consequence, the occupations they can choose for a living. The close link between geography and place is clearly formulated by John A. Agnew: “Geography is the study of how the physical environment, the spatial organization of powerful institutions [...] and the lived experience and ideas of groups of people interact and give rise to geographical, which is to say place-to-place, differences in landscapes and ways of life” (“Introduction” 1). As this quote emphasizes, geography is directly linked to place and how people interact with that place, and it also serves to show that the landscapes of different places control or shape “ways of life.” This also coincides with the definition of geographical determinism offered in the introduction, where an environment or place is given credit for “molding human activity” in that area (Mahoney and Katz xiii).

In “Dangerous Ground,” when commenting on another author, Proulx offers a comment on place that informs also her own stories: “Rural people [...] are *of* the landscape, their lives ruled by place. And when landscape is presented in detail in fiction, it literally grounds the work, gives it a strength and a sense of truth not possible to achieve through words on the page in any other way” (14). This emphasizes the deterministic quality that place can have, but it also shows how important the “sense of truth” is, and in Proulx’s fiction, this is achieved by grounding her work in geography and landscape, and the meticulous details of her characters’ lives. Proulx’s place is a place where the geography and

landscape function as determining forces in these characters' lives, and there seems to be no way to get out from under the claw of the climate.

The underlying idea of determinism can frequently be detected in both *Postcards* and the *Wyoming Stories*. As we will see in the next chapters, there are several different forces that have a determining effect on Proulx's characters. These forces include history, economy, geography and place. An interesting question to discuss will be what degree of control over their own destinies is it possible to see in these characters. This chapter has aimed to show that Proulx can be seen as an author that is intrigued by some of the same ideas that also occupied the naturalists, and that it is possible to add Proulx to a list of American authors that have ensured naturalisms' longevity. Even if some critics have commented on this link between Proulx and naturalism, it tends to be mentioned only in passing with no further development. This thesis aims to provide some grounding for this link and to show that, in addition to geography and landscape, there are also other circumstances that influence the characters, and show that they are at the mercy of forces, both external and internal, they cannot control.

## Chapter Two

### *Postcards: Blood-Ties and Roots*

Life cripples us up in different ways but it gets everybody. It gets everybody is how I look at it. Gets you again and again and one day it wins. (Proulx, *Postcards* 195)

*Postcards* is Annie Proulx's first novel. It was published in 1992 to critical acclaim.

Reviewers said that the novel felt like a fourth or a fifth novel, not a first. However, many thought that Proulx was hard on her characters and that the ending to the novel was too dark.

In her next novel, *The Shipping News*, Proulx chose a different approach, which she comments on in an interview with *The Atlantic Online*: "I had a good time writing it because so many people told me my first novel, *Postcards*, was dark. I said, 'You like a happy ending do you? Well, I'll just give you a happy ending'" ("Imagination"). In this novel, the absence of pain is the supposed happy ending, which makes it ironic. As Proulx further states in the interview, "The entire book is set up to make a lack of misery seem like blinding happiness." According to Proulx, this is "what most of us settle for in life – a situation that may not be ecstatically glorious and joyful but is nonetheless not painful" ("Imagination").

This proves to be a good indication of how Proulx chooses to draw her characters, and the darkness that she has embedded in her characters, I will argue, can be linked to literary naturalism. Talking about her subject matter and the fates of her characters, Proulx has said: "[r]ural life [...] is high in accident and, for many, suffused with a trapped feeling, a besetting sense of circumstances beyond individual control" ("An Interview" 89). These circumstances beyond individual control are very much present in *Postcards*, and this chapter will look into how they shape and condition the characters of the novel. The words of the epigraph to this chapter are spoken by Loyal as an answer to why he does not go to a "head doctor" to try and sort out his problems (*Postcards* 195), and they serve well to sum up what will be the main

focus of this chapter, which is to examine how the characters in *Postcards* are at the mercy of circumstances they cannot control. The epigraph highlights the question of determinism, as it suggests that in the end “life” ultimately wins (195). As the story progresses it becomes clear that the characters are not free to decide their own destinies and they are controlled rather than in control. The question of agency and the possibility for individual characters to change their fates will be addressed.

Hal Crimmel, in “Born Under a Bad Sign,” states that Proulx’s short story collection *Heart Songs* “retain[s] elements of local color fiction characterized by the limiting effects of geography and climate on the characters in the stories” (63). I will not focus on whether Proulx’s writing could be classified as retaining “elements of local color fiction,” but I will suggest that some of the same “limiting effects of geography and climate” can be found in *Postcards*. In addition to looking into factors such as “geography and climate,” I will consider “the limiting effects” of factors and circumstances such as a changing historical situation, heredity and ties to place. As mentioned in Chapter One, Asquith has noted about *Postcards* that “the scope remains epic” (24), linking Proulx with writers such as Steinbeck and Norris. Asquith further points to some similarities between *Postcards* and *McTeague*, arguing that “social Darwinism, particularly how the civilized man must struggle with his animalistic tendencies, both violent and sexual” is a theme in *McTeague* and that “such concerns are, of course central to the plot of *Postcards*” (24). However, after these initial comments, Asquith breaks his line of argument and he does not follow up his claim about naturalism. This is, as I have previously argued, symptomatic of a general tendency in criticism on Proulx’s work.

The last section of the chapter will shift the focus onto what I will for now call determinism of place. The aspect of determinism in itself points back towards naturalism, and I want to argue that Proulx uses place, geography and landscape as factors that impact and

limit her characters. Also in *Postcards* there is a strong sense of place, and several of the characters are shaped and limited by their strong connections to their home.

### **The Fatal Accident: Doomed From the Start**

*Postcards* starts with an event that sets the entire plot of the novel in motion. Loyal accidentally kills his girlfriend, Billy, during sex, and this has catastrophic consequences for him and his family. Already on the very first pages of the novel, the text expresses ambiguity towards the issue of control. This becomes evident in the scene describing Loyal's killing of Billy: "Even in the midst of the *involuntary* orgasmic jerking he knew" (3; emphasis added). The same can be said for his reaction after he realizes that Billy is dead: "*Instinctively* he translated the withering shock into work, his answer to what he did not want to understand, to persistent toothache, hard weather, the sense of loneliness. [...] A secretive *reflex* worked in him" (4; emphasis added). The construction of the sentences suggests that Loyal is not in control of his body and his actions, and this indicates that the issue of control is a thematic focus.

While *Postcards* is narrated by a third-person omniscient narrator throughout, the focalization shifts between chapters and between characters. This contributes both to a certain narrative playfulness, and allows the reader insight into the thoughts of the members of the Blood family, even if the focus is mainly on Loyal. The novel starts out on a hillside farm in Cream Hill, Vermont, during the Second World War. By the end of the novel the reader has learnt the fate of all the members of the family, but one of the sons, Loyal, is the one that receives the most attention. After accidentally killing Billy, Loyal is forced to abandon his family and the family farm. Loyal is essentially the one that keeps this farm running, and when he leaves, the responsibility is left to the father of the household, Mink, and his one-armed brother Dub. The only means of communication between Loyal and his family is the

postcards that Loyal sends home on occasion, as he moves all over the western part of the United States, never fully able to settle down. Loyal never learns about the accidents and ills befalling his family, and his fear of being tracked down on account of his crime of murder also prevents him from leaving a return address. He never learns that he does not need to be a fugitive, nor that Billy's body is never discovered by the authorities. Loyal's last postcard is sent in 1988, and is addressed to "Ma Pa Mernelle Dub" as if nothing has changed at home over the last 44 years, and as if the entire rest of his family were still living together on the farm (330). In all likelihood, his parents would be dead of old age by this time, a fact he ignores.

Loyal is not loyal at all, neither to his family, his blood, nor to himself. All Loyal has ever wanted to do is be a farmer, and running the home farm was something he loved and was good at: "He, who'd never thought beyond the farm, never wanted anything but the farm, was on his way" (13). This is also highly ironic, as it was Billy that always wanted to get away from the farm, insisting that she was "not going to end up on your goddamn farm pouring slops to the pigs and looking a hundred years old before I'm forty with a big belly every year and kids all over the place" (81). It is also ironic that Billy is the one that ends up on the farm, being forever buried in the stone wall on the Blood family property. Loyal wanted them to stay, and this is exemplified by all the plans that he has for the farm, plans that Mink does not always agree on. It is clear that Loyal is the one that thinks of the future of the farm, and he also takes a lot of pride in what he does: "Beautiful pasture, four or five years of his work to bring that field up, none of Mink's labor, his, draining the boggy place [...]. That's what made those cows give the butterfat, nothing Mink did, but him, Loyal, the best pasture in the country" (14). In leaving, Loyal is not true to his calling as a farmer, something that haunts him until the very end of the novel. He never seems to get anything right after he leaves.

Loyal drifts about aimlessly, taking job after job as a migrant worker, always haunted by his dream to own his own farm, and be a self-made man. When Loyal daydreams about his farm, he envisions the best farm in the world: “The soil would be crumbly and stoneless. There would be a stream with flat rich bottomland on each side for corn and hay crops [...]. On the height of his land he imagined a stand of evergreen, and in the dark spruce a spring welling up from the earth’s pure underground water” (60). This shows that Loyal is a dreamer and a farmer at heart, even if this dream might seem a bit naïve as there might not exist such a perfect piece of land anywhere. But it only shows, as their neighbor Mrs. Nipple says, that “you can take the boy out of the country but you can’t take the country out of the boy” (23). Mrs. Nipple’s comment serves to show that the country, being raised in it and living in it, will always stay with Loyal. No matter what job he does, whether it’s mining, uranium prospecting, bone-digging or fox-trapping, he keeps yearning for the farm, his own farm.

### **The End of the Family Farm**

As already mentioned in Chapter One, history is an important part of the writing of Annie Proulx. In *Postcards*, changing socio-economic conditions seem to be one of the factors that limit and shape the characters’ life. Throughout the novel the reader is presented with both family history, regional history and, on a larger scale, national history. The socio-historical changes that affect the Blood family farm reflect those that affected the entire nation. Chapters are often headed by a postcard, although a postcard may also appear in the middle of a chapter. Some are sent and received by different members of the Blood family, while others are random postcards. The postcards generally serve as a preview or foreshadowing of what will happen in a chapter. Asquith comments on this narrative strategy when he argues that the reader is invited to fill in parts of the story for themselves (31). This feature of the text can be considered as an example of postmodern playfulness, which positions Proulx’s writing in our

time. This use of the postcards as a foreshadowing element is important, but more important is the fact that the postcards constitute a timeline of events that the reader can follow.

Several of the episodes in works by Proulx are inspired by actual events, which only add to the argument of how important history is to her writing. One such episode in *Postcards* is when Mink burns down their farm for the insurance money. Proulx explains that she found the idea for this episode in the novel by reading fire marshal reports from the years of the Depression: “There were a number of dismal accounts of farmers burning down their houses and barns for the meager insurance money” (“An Interview” 84). The farm lacks electricity, and we can see from the postcard introducing the novel that Loyal has contacted a company called Electroline in an effort to get electricity to the farm, because “[t]he electricity was all around them” (112). In the quote that follows we can see the powerlessness that Dub feels when he recalls what Loyal has said about electricity to farms being prioritized and the reality they are experiencing:

He’d believed that crap Loyal used to give the old man, that stuff about the electricity coming in right after the War. ‘First priority to farms.’ He’d read it out of the paper. That was a laugh. First priority to towns, any town, to garages, stores, knickknack shops. Six years after the War and they still hadn’t made it here. Now a new War coming along. Korea, whatever the hell that was. And if stinking MacArthur had his way, they’d be fighting China. (112)

This powerlessness at the hands of big businesses, who in practice control how the Blood family can conduct their farming, echoes the naturalistic literary mode. The farm cannot survive and cannot turn profit without electricity, and the situation is beyond the control of those affected by the system.

Most farmers around the Bloods have sold their farms and moved on. Mink reminisces about life before, how “everybody had been poor,” but when you needed help “[r]elatives and



neighbors came without asking to fill in. Where the hell were they now when he was sinking under the black water?” (115). Now, they get “[p]oorer every year, the work harder, the prices higher, the chances of pulling out of it fewer and fewer” (115). Mink is holding on to a way of life, and a way of farming, that is dying out. In addition to everyone moving on to other farms with electricity or moving into the city, “[t]he bank had changed hands, bought out by some big outfit over in Burlington, mean sons” (115). There were no places left to go to for help. As electricity becomes more and more frequent on farms, the farms still working without electricity struggled to survive. After Loyal leaves, Mink and Dub are buried under the weight and work of the farm. Mink explains to Jewell:

‘Three and a half hours of milkin’. I done the milkin’, Dub lugged the goddamn milk, and it adds up to seven hours a day on milkin’ alone, add in grainin’ and hayin’ ‘em, clean out the barn, got to spread some of that manure before the snow comes, tomorrow we got to get the cream down to the road by seven [...]. The butcherin’s got to be did this week if we stay up all night doin’ it. If I was to make a list of the things that got to be did right now it would take every piece of paper in the house [...]. There ain’t no way we can do it unless we give up sleepin’. (19-20)

The workload is enormous, and Mink decides to burn down the farm. This is revealed in a chapter introduced by a “1951 Fire Marshal’s Report” stating that “Marvin E. Blood, the son of the owner, was arrested on the charge of first degree arson [...]. Minkton Blood was arrested, a confession obtained” (110). After the “Report,” the chapter starts with the words: “The inside of the barn had never been darker [...]. There was nervous stamping, an atmosphere in the barn, worse than it had been the night before” (110). The fact that the nervousness is worse than the night before suggests that tensions have been building up and is soon reaching its breaking point. Loyal was the only full-bodied and able-bodied person working on the farm. Dub has only one arm, as he lost an arm during one of his outings, and

Mink is in bad health after a tractor fell on him. They could not have kept the farm afloat for much longer. The fact that they never had electricity greatly impacted the way they could run their farm, and lack of electricity was in the end a circumstance that doomed them.

Mink's plan to burn down the farm for insurance money almost worked. The money had already been paid, as the insurance company, the Weeping Water Farm Insurance Company, had ruled it an accident. However, one worker at the insurance company, Vic Baker, "twenty-two, eager and smart at his first job," considers himself somewhat of an investigator, and the manager, Mr. Plute "who scented his [Vic's] ambition, thought him a little brute and gave him the 'fire of suspicious origin' to weasel into." Consequently, Vic, suspicious of the fire at the Blood farm, reopens the case (120). It seems as though Vic has an eye for fraud: "Sometimes you got a feeling for something wrong after the fact" (121). First of all, he damns farms with no electricity or telephone because "something happened and it was all over" (121). Vic starts becoming suspicious when he sees that the Blood family did not manage to get out even one cow, the fire started only a short distance from the water pump, and the claim was sent in the same day of the fire. So Vic decides to go out to the farm and take a look. The reader has previously learnt, by the Fire Marshal's report introducing the chapter of the fire, that both Dub and Mink are arrested for arson, and it is later revealed that Mink hangs himself in prison. Dub is eventually released from prison and goes back to the farm for a while. A helpless Jewell is left contemplating how it all went wrong: "When I was a girl there were so many aunts and uncles, cousins, in-laws, second cousins. All of 'em living right around here. They'd be here now, that kind of big fam'ly if it was them times. [...] And here we sit, the three of us. And that's all" (126). Jewell expresses here the same thoughts that went through Mink's head before he decided to burn down the barn, that they were alone.

The Blood family farm is eventually sold through their neighbor, Ronnie Nipple, who cons Jewell into believing that she is getting a good deal. The farm is split into three parts,

where Jewell gets to keep the house and a small plot of earth for a garden. As Jewell is left helpless and almost alone, she wonders why Mink didn't ask for more help, and why his brother, Ott, did not help out more. Ronnie answers her by saying: "you folks kept to yourselves up here. Missed out on a few things. Changes" (128). That is to say that their farm eventually went under, partly because of changes to the society and their surroundings and the fact that the Blood's did not keep up with the changes. These examples show that the Blood family held on to a way of life that was dying out, or at least that was changing radically. These changes are presented as determining factors in shaping the lives of the family, and in the end the family loses. The farm is eventually sold to Dr. Witkin, a doctor from Boston, as a vacation home. Dr. Witkin, described as: "[...] urban in habitat but haunted from childhood by fantasies of wilderness [...]" (146), represents the final nail in the coffin for the Blood family farm. Dr. Witkin also represents the first step in the final disintegration of this rural farming district, where the family farms disappear and are either turned into vacation homes or used as a trailer parks, which is what happens to Cream Hill at the end of the novel.

### **Like Father Like Son**

As already mentioned, naturalism was a literary mode concerned with humans being shaped and determined by forces outside their control, and this underlying philosophy is naturalism's main divergence from the mode of realism. Proulx's characters are, to a degree, shaped and formed by both outside forces and internal drives beyond their control. As we have seen, the Blood family is in a way forced by the circumstances surrounding them, and this directs their lives and their outcomes. Another force that controls the characters of the novel and contribute to determining what happens to them is heredity. A character trait that controls the Bloods is rage, an internal drive that rejects all sense of reason, which often leads to violence. This is most obvious in the male characters of the novel, especially Mink and Loyal.

Naturalists held the belief that people were to some degree controlled by their urges, something that makes humans not that different from animals. As Pizer observes:

Naturalistic writers found that the poor – in education, intellect, and worldly goods – are indeed pushed and forced, [...] that few men can overcome the handicaps imposed upon them by inadequacies of body and mind, and that many men have instinctive needs which are not amenable to moral suasion or rational argument. (*Twentieth-Century* 6)

It is possible to find traces of the same philosophy in *Postcards*. The best example in the novel of a “handicap imposed [...] by inadequacies of body and mind” is Mink’s anger and often violent behavior. His anger is all-consuming, and the first time we encounter Mink’s rage is when Loyal tells his family that he is leaving. At first, Mink is confused since all Loyal talks about are his plans for the farm, and the future. Mink seems to go into a short moment of desperation before his anger takes control of him. In this moment, the text reveals a different side of the otherwise angry and brutal Mink, exemplified by his half-plea to Loyal: “‘You can’t leave us run this farm alone,’ said Mink in his buzzing voice, the self-pity getting into his rage. ‘Jesus Christ, your brother’s only got the one arm and my health is down since the damn tractor laid on my chest’” (11). As Loyal goes to pack his valise he can hear that, “Down there Mink was firing up, bellowing now, something smashing and rattling” (13). It almost seems as though Mink is like a ticking bomb, building up to explode.

It is when Loyal has left we can see that Mink is overpowered by his emotions, and not the one in control. Mink is infuriated and is seen “panting in unsatisfied rage, limped through the house throwing down Loyal’s things” (15). When Mink is enraged, rational thought goes out the window as his anger consumes him. Before Loyal left the farm and his family, he was the one most invested in the farm, at least when it came to modernization and future prospects. After Loyal has left, Mink finds Loyal’s hunting rifle, goes out to the barn

and shots the Holsteins, two cows that Loyal has bought because they offer more milk than the Jersey cows. The rest of the family are in the kitchen, where Dub expresses his dismay. As he goes out of the house, his mother urges him: “Be careful [...] hoping he knew what he should be careful about” (17), suggesting that there is no telling what Mink might do. Mernelle, the only daughter in the family fears that, “He could chop them all with the axe” (17). Mink has no control over his actions, a feature that scares the rest of his family. When he comes back inside the house, “[h]is hands were steady. The streaked hair stuck out from under his cap, the bill like a menacing horn over his eyes. ‘By god, that’s two of them we don’t have to milk’” (17). Mink’s rage overpowered him, and the description of Mink after killing the cows evokes the image of a bull. Mink is almost reduced to an animal, at least something resembling an animal. Jewell also questions Mink’s decision of killing the cows, even if she does not say it out loud:

‘We could of at least took the meat,’ she though, and Mink’s anger seemed to her so wasteful he would have to burn for it in a hell as crimson as the landscape seen through the red cellophane strip on cigarette packs. Not a new thought.

He had done a hundred things. She could not forget all of them. (17-18)

The text seems to make a point of stating that this behavior is common for Mink, and that out of all the “hundred things” Mink has done, his anger is what drives him.

The killing of the cows is not the first time Mink has killed in rage. The family had a cat: “It made the mistake of rubbing against Mink’s leg when his temper was up, shoveling manure out of the gutter and he’d broken its back with a swipe of the shovel” (33). In the heat of the moment, Mink is not in control. His rage also affected his children, and Jewell had to stop him from beating his kids, the way he had been beaten as a child: “But she couldn’t hold it against him because he came off the fire as fast as he heated up. The Blood temper. Loyal had the same flash temper. And mild as milk afterwards” (18). When Jewell is lost in the

woods, right before she dies of an aneurism, she “wished for Mink” because she “[s]aw how he used his rage to pull him through difficult work, through a difficult life” (242). It seems like she in a way excuses Mink’s anger, and makes it seem as a necessary evil to get through such a hard life. Once again, the text invites the reader to have some sort of compassion or sympathy for Mink and the hard life he has had.

Mink is also in a sense controlled by his anger when it comes to the need to modernize the farm. After Loyal leaves, Mink’s rage makes him throw away all reason, and with it all attempts at modernization, just because it was Loyal’s initiative. For instance, Mink writes a postcard to stop artificial insemination of his cows. After 1945 artificial insemination of livestock made great advances to farming, something Loyal wanted to try. In a bullish and angry tone Mink writes in a postcard heading a chapter: “Don’t come out my farm no more with your damn insemination racket. We got rid the Holstins. Guess we stick with god local Jersey stock do it the old fashion way with a bull” (15). Instead of conforming to more modern ways of farming, something that would be better for the farm, Mink decides against it because it is what Loyal wanted to do.

Having inherited Mink’s violent temper, Loyal is also determined by heredity. As already noted, *Postcards* opens with Loyal killing Billy during sex: “Even in the midst of the involuntary orgasmic jerkin he knew. Knew she was dead, knew he was on his way” (3). Already here, we can see an echo of the naturalist belief in what Campbell refers to as “the primacy of heredity” (229). Asquith argues that “Loyal’s tragic flaw [...] is the Blood temper mixed with his own erotic desire” (36). After Loyal has buried Billy he contemplates what he is going to do next, and he starts remembering gathering apples with his grandfather and his grandfather’s insistence that “one rotten apple spoils the whole goddam barrel” (5). This can be read as vaguely ironic, since Loyal inherited his temper from his father, and Mink inherited it from his father and the three generations of Blood men could be said to represent the rotten

apples. Gregg Crane writes that naturalists believed that human beings are “largely if not entirely controlled by forces and circumstances beyond his or her control, such as a biologically inherent predisposition to violence [...]” (163). As the examples show, *Postcards* offers some of the same beliefs.

Loyal’s anger and violent temper stay with him throughout the novel. His guilt over what he did to Billy makes him unable to touch a woman again. Each time he approaches a woman, at least sexually, he suffers what seems like a panic attack and passes out, as in the Big Pinetree gas station (*Postcards* 32). Loyal realizes that his “price for getting away” is not being able to be with another woman:

If it wasn’t Billy it wouldn’t be anyone else. The price for getting away. No wife, no family, no children, no human comfort in the quotidian unfolding of his life; for him, restless shifting from one town to another, the narrow fence of solitary thought, the pitiful easement of masturbation, lopsided ideas and soliloquies so easily transmuted to crazy mouthings. (58-59)

Loyal’s desire and anger cripple him, and his desire for women becomes like a dark passenger that is always with him, depicted as a “black mucky channel that ran from his genitals to his soul” (59). The only women he interacts with are the wives of some of his friends, like Jack’s wife, or, in the case of Marta, women he fights. We can see the same “flash temper” in Loyal towards the very end of the novel. Loyal’s feeling of loneliness is immense, and as he realizes that he is alone, poor and sick, he finds solace in a half-rotted branch he picks up in a meadow. Believing or imagining the branch to be a woman, Loyal dances with it until he stumbles and cries: “‘Trip me, you bitch. Get out.’ Panting, retching with the cough. And hurled the branch, glad to see it break in a spray of red pulp. His loneliness was not innocent” (331). After Loyal has tossed away the branch “he stood in the silent meadow without even a rotted branch” (332). Again, the reader is invited to feel some compassion for this lonely old

man who has no one. The reader has been a passenger on Loyal's travels throughout the novel, and seen how his life has crumbled time after time, often through no fault of his own. As previous examples have shown, both Loyal and Mink are at the mercy of forces they are not in control of.

### **Rootedness and Rootlessness**

When Loyal leaves his family and farm at the beginning of the novel Dub says "Hey, you leave, Loyal [...] 'you're finishin' off this farm" (12). This statement foreshadows the fall of the farm, but also in a way, the fall of the family. Later in the novel, Mernelle further emphasizes this point by saying to her husband, whom she found through an ad in the paper: "This family has got a habit of disappearing. Every one of this family is gone expect me. And I'm the end of it [...]. The luck was used up long ago, Ray. Bloods been running on empty since Loyal lit out" (249). Loyal leaving is the start of their family's downward spiral, and one by one, the family members disappear, either by dying or moving away in search of a better life. Both of the sons leave. Even if Loyal's prime motivation for leaving is his crime, both he and Dub leave to seek fulfillment elsewhere. They both pull up their roots and leave the place that has helped mold them in search of a new life. In Loyal's case, this is the start of his rootlessness. They both set out to fulfill the American Dream, Loyal as a farmer and self-made man and Dub's highest wish is to get rich.

Dub finds his escape in Florida, where he is no longer the family fool. Dub's journey is depicted as a search for wealth as he finally manages to get away from the farm. Every dream Dub ever had was "without a farm in it" (49), and after Dub gets out of jail he abandons the rest of his family, sending a postcard saying that he is "thru with hard times" (151). In Florida he attends a real estate school, where the teacher's goal is to make all of his students millionaires. The motto of the class is "I refuse to accept the fate life handed me. I



will MAKE my OWN fate” (164). As the teacher proudly presents the aim of the class, we see that Dub is still very much a fool to believe that wealth comes this easily: “In other classes you’ll learn about deeds and conveyances, contracts, title searchers, brokerage and mortgages, but with Maurice Sheridan Bent you will learn how to be a millionaire” (164). We learn little of how Dub manages to become rich and a seemingly successful real estate agent, but the words “You’re not the type that makes it” (162), spoken by a fellow in crime before they split up, stays with the reader. The image given of Dub throughout the novel is that of a fool, and through the course of the text he is depicted as a person who does not make it, except through dubious means.

Dub does not share his wealth with his family. He sends his mother a pair of grapefruits on one occasion, and later pays for her head stone instead of showing up for her funeral. When Mernelle loses her husband to cancer, all Dub does is write “He was a good man” in a postcard (320). Asquith argues that Dub “lives the American Dream while creating the American nightmare,” alluding to the fact that Dub’s real estate work destroys the landscape of Florida to make room for a Disneyland made out of plastic (53-54). Dub has gotten as far away from the farm as possible, and the fact that he is destroying nature, killing fauna and flora does not seem to concern him at all. However, it is hinted that his work is not wholly legitimate, as a postcard from the IRS states that he has been summoned to an audit (*Postcards* 288). Thus the text suggests that the only way Dub manages to realize his dream is by cheating, which function as a powerful critique on the American Dream, a critique it is possible to trace also elsewhere in the novel.

Loyal’s life stands in contrast to Dub’s as he is fleeing from his dream life to a life that in the end does not measure up to what he already had. Loyal goes west in search of a place where he can settle down and manage his own farm, be a self-made man. Loyal’s movement west echoes Horace Greely’s motto from 1865 of “Go west, young man, and grow up with the

country” (qtd. in Axelrod 57).<sup>3</sup> Because of his crime Loyal is forced to leave his home and his dream, and pursue a new dream of owning his own farm out west. Already in the early 1840s, Greeley published an article saying: “If you have no family or friends to aid you ... turn your face to the Great West and there build up your home and fortune” (qtd. in Axelrod 57), a recommendation that fits well with Loyal’s vision of what going west means. Loyal uses it as an escape hatch, and his vision is in line with the cultural myth of going west when he says that: “We’re pullin’ out and going out west, someplace out there, buy a farm, make a new start” (*Postcards* 10).

Proulx has stated that Loyal “picks up a dozen different regional occupations on his long journey westward, an ironic and miniature version of the American frontier expansion westward” (“An Interview” 84). The use of the word ironic in this statement could be argued to point towards the implicit critique of the American Dream, in that Loyal does not manage to achieve the success and “new start” often associated with the westward movement. On his journey, Loyal moves further and further west, and except from driving the wrong way when he is too old and weak to understand a map, he moves further away from home. Loyal’s journey could be argued to repeat the pattern of the traditional myth that spurred the westward movement. Richard Slotkin notes that “[...] repeated cycles of *separation* and *regression* were necessary preludes to an improvement in life and fortune” (11), and that, “The achievement of ‘progress’ was [...] inevitably associated with territorial expansion and colored by the experience, the politics, and the peculiar psychology of emigration” (11). Loyal is in fact separated from his family and his home, and his journey west repeats the journey inspired by the same hope that drove the “original” pioneers westward. With his comment to his family that he and Billy are “going out west” (*Postcards* 16), Loyal echoes this hope of progress by way of emigration. Loyal’s thirst for money and wealth can also be

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<sup>3</sup> Axelrod explains that Greeley is usually credited for this quote, but he in fact borrowed it from John Babsone Lane Soule, who published it in an editorial in the *Terre Haute Express* in 1851.

seen as echoing what Slotkin refers to as a “bonanza frontier,” which as Slotkin explains, began with the Gold Rush in California in 1848, and which “offer[ed] the prospect of immediate and impressive economic benefit for a relatively low capital outlay” (18). In addition to wanting his own place then, Loyal is intrigued by the idea of quick money: “The electric feeling of quick money was everywhere. Christ. It excited him” (*Postcards* 165). This suggests Loyal’s hopeful and naïve nature, as he apparently believes that striking it rich and staying rich can be easily and quickly achieved. This is in line with his believing that nothing has changed at his home farm or with his family, and his idea that when he gets his own farm he will be able to live off the land and be self-sufficient.

From the second Loyal left the farm in Vermont, he has been on the losing side of the scale, and everything that happens to him while seeking his fortune in the west can be said to go against expectations inspired by the traditional myth of the west. However, his journey west begins close to a hundred years later than that of the “original” pioneers. Loyal goes west in the hope that he will find a farm and make a living for himself. The irony is that Loyal does not achieve fulfillment or happiness, even though he sets out with a dream of a homestead, of owning his own farm, just “a little place I can work myself” (99). In Loyal it is possible to see a repetition of history, in that many that went before him were equally hopeful, but very few fulfilled their dream. This discrepancy between the hopeful dreams the myth supports and the harsh realities that many eventually met, is a historical lesson Loyal has not learnt. Exemplified through all his failed endeavors, Proulx’s portrayal of Loyal exposes the failure of the Dream; he is one of those that, despite their best efforts, do not achieve happiness.

Loyal learns that getting a farm out west is not as easy as he had hoped. Nothing seems to go the way he has planned, and it almost seems as if he is floating across American like tumbleweed, misfortune following wherever he goes. It seems as though Loyal’s

misfortune is largely due to outside circumstances, whether it be weather or landscape, but also due to his own nature. Mrs. Nipple's characterization of Loyal and the rest of the Blood family seem fitting: "She never understood why Ronnie liked Loyal, no standout, even in the crowd of Bloods with their knack for doing the wrong thing [...]" (22). This "knack for doing the wrong thing" which makes him miss his chance every time he ventures into something new appears to be rooted in his character. Loyal's first job after he leaves is in an airplane factory in Chicago. This was a job with good pay, but this is not the kind of job Loyal wants to do and the need to "get in the open air" drives him to quit (56), and he continues his journey west in search of "his own place" (59). The money Loyal has managed to save up during his work in the factory is stolen from him by two hitch-hikers who exploit Loyal's gullible nature. The encounter with the hitch-hikers leaves him partially scalped, broke and without a car. Loyal moves on to work in a gold mine called the Mary Mugg. Once again, Loyal is nearly killed as the mine caves in and traps the workers, killing one of them. In 1963 Loyal is "roaming over the dusty Colorado Plateau" as a uranium prospector, excited by the prospect of striking it rich quickly. Once again, Loyal has no luck:

But wouldn't you know, he was just in time for the federal cutback. The buying station shut down, the price guarantees dissolved. The smart guys were using helicopters and planes, skimming along the mesas with fifteen-hundred-dollar scintillometers. The scratch-dirt prospector had a hard time. What the hell, he kept moving [...].

It was all big business now, deep mines, acid leaching, chemical extraction, company prospectors [...]. (165-66)

These examples show that no matter what Loyal tries to do, he fails because of circumstances he cannot control. He seems to be one step behind at all times, always starting something new a little bit too late for it to be profitable. The construction of the text makes it possible to see the irony rather than tragedy of Loyal's life, because at this point it does not come as a great

surprise that Loyal is too late. Up until now, he has never done anything right and one may wonder if he ever will.

Loyal reaches the age of 51 before he realizes that time is running out for him and that he has still not bought a farm as he set out to do: “the old urge for the farm was like the heat of a banked fire, the time was slipping down [...]. One of these days he would wake up dead. He had not yet made a start on the farm, on curing his trouble with earth” (209). However, when he finally buys his own farm, it is not exactly as he imagined it. He buys “a curve of earth, a slat-sided house leaning into the wind, starved fields among the ranches and sugar beet farms” in North Dakota (210). His farm is pretty far from the “crumbly and stoneless” soil he envisions in his daydreams, and as he is buying the property he is wondering “[w]hy the hell was he buying this [...] bony square of dirt” (210). Loyal has now realized his dream of getting his own place, but his situation does not improve. He struggles to get into the way of farming that is required in this particular place, as it is not the same as his family farm in Vermont, and times have changed since Loyal was a farmer. At first, he starts thinking of cattle because “[t]here was money in cattle, but you had to be born to it he thought. He only knew dairy farming, pasture, hay, woodlot, some crop management. It wasn’t that kind of place. Things were different in farming now” (211). He does not know this land, and he does not have the means to buy the necessary machines. As his closest neighbor living three miles away, Mr. Shears, tells him: “Get as big and strong as you can. That’s the way it’s all going, big, quick machinery. You don’t have that stuff you don’t got a chance in hell of makin’ it in farmin’” (212). After a couple of years, Loyal’s farm is lost because a McDonald’s employee decides to set fire to dry tumbleweed in a storm. This results in a huge fire that burns down Loyal’s farm, and Loyal does not have any insurance.

Loyal ventures into several different occupations, and Asquith observes that, “Loyal’s working history provides a social commentary on a dying way of life. It also becomes part of

the epic framework of the novel, as the reader is shown, in true Steinbeck fashion, the tragedy of those battling with economic forces beyond their control” (41-42). Every time Loyal tries something new or tries to start over he seems to be too late. In all the different occupations Loyal has had and all the different ways he has tried to make a good life for himself, it become clear that it is not for lack of trying that he still has not realized his dream. It is possible to read this as an ironic commentary on the American Dream, which implies that all that is necessary to make it, is to work hard and never give up. However, even when Loyal works hard, tries a number of different vocations and never gives up, in the end he never succeeds. The novel suggests that it is not a given that if you only work hard you will succeed, and thus serves as a commentary on a fundamental American ideology. Dub also travels away from home in search of the American Dream, and his wish is to strike it rich and achieve an ascent from rags to riches. The only way Dub manages to get wealthy is by cheating, and this also suggests that the Dream is not as easily attainable as it is often considered to be. As we will see in the next chapter, this is also a theme in other writings by Proulx, for instance the short story “Job History” from *Close Range*.

It is only after Loyal’s farm burns down that he realizes “it seemed his life was like a weak chain, the links breaking one by one” (232), finally coming to terms with the fact that nothing goes the way he has planned and that he is as far away from his dreams as ever before. People he has met have commented on Loyal’s string of bad luck, and the most memorable observation is made by Ben, a drunk, amateur astronomer living in New Mexico, whom Loyal worked for a brief period: “There’s something haywire about you. There’s something truly fucked up about you. I don’t know what it is, but I can smell it. You’re accident-prone. You suffer losses. You’re tilted way far off center. You run hard but don’t get anywhere. And I don’t think it’s easy for you” (194). This observation is made before Loyal himself realizes that his life is like a “weak chain.” Loyal is, as all the examples above

suggests, “accident-prone,” and he has suffered several losses. However, the greatest loss Loyal has to cope with is the loss of his home, the family farm. This loss is also what fuels the story, and this loss is the reason why Loyal has gone west to seek his fortune.

### **Ties to Place and Loss of Home**

Landscape and geography are important in *Postcards* as in all of Proulx’s writing. Landscape holds a central function from the beginning of the novel, and as Asquith argues: “The Blood family is carved out of the inhospitable nature that surrounds them” (32). Several of the characters in the Blood family seem to have grown out of the very soil of New England, and this is emphasized by their strong connections to their home place. In several of the incidents befalling Loyal, geographical elements are co-contributors to the accidents that happen.

Whether it is a tornado, a cave in, or a storm, it seems as if the natural elements are working against Loyal. Compared to the three volumes of *Wyoming Stories*, geographical determinism is much less pronounced in *Postcards*. Nonetheless, it still inspires the representation of characters, events and plot, and the landscape is still significant and described in great detail in true Annie Proulx fashion. As we will see in Chapter Three, geography becomes a much more obvious determining factor in the *Wyoming Stories*.

It becomes clear in *Postcards* that the Blood family’s ties to place are so strong that they contribute to their downfall. Jewell’s attitude of “what can’t be cured must be endured” seems to fit with both herself and Loyal (198). They both share a strong commitment to their home and place, and they both have the same quality of endurance, meaning that they will continue working and trying to better their lives no matter what life throws at them. The invading junipers can be seen as an example of a hardship that “can’t be cured” and therefore “must be endured.” The juniper function both as an example of the hardship of managing a farm and as a foreshadowing of the downfall of the farm. Already on the first page of the

novel when Loyal has killed Billy, “Mats of juniper flowed across the field like spilled water” (3). When Loyal tells his family that he is leaving, Mink brings up the juniper again, as well as other hassles that make farming harder: “You bitched and whined about the juniper movin’ into the fields, talk half an hour about the orchard, suckers, deadwood, the bull spruce is chokin’ out the spring in the pine tree corner you said, west hayfields ain’t been cut in three years, full of cherry trash” (11). Mink’s words emphasize that the Blood farm is facing many obstacles, even before the question of profit is raised. The last time we hear of the juniper is right before Jewell has to split their farm and sell off parts of the land: “‘Look how the juniper’s come into that pasture,’ she said. ‘In only a couple of years. When I think how hard Loyal worked to keep it out of ours I just shudder. I suppose it’ll move right in as fast as it can’” (73-74). The juniper, in a sense, takes over the Blood farm just as the family has to give it up.

Jewell has a hard time giving up their farm and their land, even after she has reluctantly sold the property to Ronnie Nipple. She moves to a trailer in a mobile home park built on a part of their land. Ott, Mink’s brother, thinks the old Blood house was “an eyesore” and wants to remove it, but Jewell “couldn’t let go of the place, still limped in back of it every day in the summer to keep the old garden patches going, though the woodchucks and deer moved in with the weeds and did a lot of damage” (196). This is to say that Jewell still lives on the Blood farm land, even when she moves out of their house and into a trailer. The fact is that Jewell has no means of getting out of this place, and even if she had, we can at least question whether she would.

Loyal’s connection to place is just as strong as Jewell’s, but he is forced to run away. His crime makes it impossible, in his eyes, to stay in Vermont and run the family farm, which in the end is all he ever wanted to do. His longing for the farm is a motif throughout the entire



novel. After Loyal loses his car, money, shoes and parts of his scalp to the Indian, he lies in the hospital thinking about his home:

A sense of his place, his home, flooded him [...]. His blood, urine, feces and semen, the tears, strands of hair, vomit, flakes of skin, his infant and childhood teeth, the clippings of finger and toenails, all the effluvia of his body were in that soil, part of that place. The work of his hands had changed the shape of the land, the weirs in the steep ditch beside the lane, the ditch itself, the smooth fields were echoes of himself in the landscape, for the laborer's vision and strength persists after the labor is done. The air was charged with his exhalations. The deer he'd shot, the trapped fox, had died because of his intentions and commissions, and their absence in the landscape was his alteration. (85-86)

This passage confirms what Hunt suggests when he says that "whatever the claims of determinism, the relationships between a people and a place are reciprocal; land works on us even as we work the land, and neither emerges unscathed" (5). In the case of *Postcards*, neither land nor person "emerges unscathed," but the consequences are most fatal for the people, and the lives of the characters, Loyal in particular, are shaped by this connection to place. This passage also confirms Wallace Stegner's notion of what being a placed or rooted person means. Stegner, himself a mobile or rootless person, writes that: "I spent my youth envying people who had lived all their lives in the houses they were born in, and had attics full of proof that they *had* lived" (201). Loyal might not have an attic full of proof, but as the passage emphasizes, the proof lies in the soil of his home, in the very landscape. Loyal is very much tied to the soil of the place that was his home, and he continues to be shaped by the longing for this place, or of a place that will feel like home. Loyal diverts this loss into a longing for a new place to call home, and a new place where he can feel fulfilled again. He

never finds it, and towards the end of the novel he realizes that “there was no place to get back to” (*Postcards* 325).

This lack of a home is a contributing factor in many of Loyal’s decisions, as he is trying to find a new home where he can prosper and thrive the way he did on the family farm. Loyal thrives when he is rooted in his home place, and because he is uprooted, his journey never ends. Loyal would have fulfilled his dream and been happy had he not accidentally killed Billy and stayed in Vermont, which is the implications of Kent Ryden’s summing up of Loyal as “a talented farmer whose life would likely have taken the most positive turn of all the characters in the book” (74). One of the reasons he does not make it as a farmer elsewhere, is that he is not born to that particular place. After Loyal leaves his home, he continues to long for, and care about the family farm. In the first couple of postcards he sends home he reminds Mink of supplies the farm needs and asks how the farm is doing. He keeps sending postcards home, but it is never the location he sends the postcards from that is the focus; it is where he is sending them to. This is exemplified by the fact that Loyal only sends the same postcards home: “another bear postcards for Jewell, written in Loyal’s handwriting” (*Postcards* 40-41). These are postcards he accidentally grabbed the first time he tried to sleep with a woman at a gas station and suffered a panic attack. For Loyal it is not the journey that is important, but what he left behind.

Towards the end of the novel, Loyal becomes the perfect image of a rootless person, as he turns his car and a wagon into a mobile home. The dream of a little place that he can work himself is still with him, because each time he comes to a new place he transforms it, and after only a week it appears that he is “anchored down, surrounded by a chicken wire fence strung on flimsy posts, meant, perhaps to give a boundary to his life or keep the dog in. He turned over a garden with a rented tiller [...]” (302). No matter where he goes in his old age or what seasonal job he manages to get, he tries to make a small space for himself where

he can apply his farming skills. It becomes clear that even though Loyal does his best to realize his dream, it just does not happen for him. The reasons for this are many and they are often beyond Loyal's control. Whether it is because of historical changes that Loyal and his family miss out on, heredity and a predisposition to violence and rash behavior, or misconceptions of how easy it is to make it as long as you work hard, in the end they all lose.

Loyal dies old and alone. Dub is almost forced by his wife, Pala, to move from Miami to Houston, where she starts a travel agency. With the exception of Mernelle, the rest of the Blood family have passed away. The novel ends with a description of the fate of the family farm. It has now turned into a full-fledged trailer park run by Dr. Witkin's son, Kevin Witkin. The postcard introducing the last chapter is sent from Pala's "Blood's Texas Travel Productions" (336), and completes the irony and tragedy of the novel. With this last chapter the disintegration of the Blood family farm is complete, since there are now no traces that this ever was a farm that served as a way of life and income for a family.

The epigraph to the novel is a passage from Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*: "But that's the part of it I always liked. He adjusted himself to beams falling, and then no more of them fell, and he adjusted himself to them not falling." This passage represents an attitude of perseverance that it is possible to trace in the members of the Blood family, especially so with Loyal and Jewell. The Blood family keep adjusting themselves to "beams" falling, but they never reach a point where the "beams" stop falling. Especially for Loyal, each accident or wrong turn is followed by another, and regardless of how hard he tries to better his life, he never achieves what he wants. I mentioned in Chapter One that Pizer argues: "The naturalist tragic hero is a figure whose potential for growth is evident but who fails to develop because of the circumstances of his life" (*Twentieth-Century* 6), and Loyal becomes a very good example of this "tragic hero." Loyal had potential, and as I discussed earlier, he could have had a good life had he not been separated from his dream, which was running the

family farm. This chapter has aimed to shed light on different circumstances that make it so that Loyal “fails to develop,” and in the end is doomed.

## Chapter Three

### “Dangerous and indifferent ground” in Wyoming

“Ranchers, too?” asked Duane Fork.

“Nah. Nothing here would bother *them*.” (Proulx, *Fine Just the Way It Is* 41)

Some of Annie Proulx’s best work is considered, by many, to be her short stories. Her three short story collections on the hard rural life of Wyoming have received critical acclaim. The first collection, *Close Range*, was published in 1999, *Bad Dirt* came in 2004, and *Fine Just the Way It Is* in 2008, and according to Proulx, this will be her last fictional work set in Wyoming. The aim of this chapter is to examine how the characters in some of these short stories, as in *Postcards*, are shaped and conditioned by outside circumstances, and that regardless of what these characters try to achieve, they tend not to succeed. I will argue that it is possible to see the same interest in and affiliation with the literary mode of naturalism in some of her short stories as in the novel *Postcards*, discussed in Chapter Two. In other words, this tendency towards naturalism is not restricted to *Postcards*, and some of the same ideas pointing in the direction of naturalism are present in other writings by Proulx. I have chosen to focus mainly on five of her Wyoming stories: “Job History” and “Pair a Spurs” from *Close Range*, “What Kind of Furniture Would Jesus Pick?” and “Man Crawling Out of Trees” from *Bad Dirt*, and “Them Old Cowboy Songs” from *Fine Just the Way It Is*.

While I will not argue that narrative and thematic features indicating an interest in naturalism are present in all of her short stories, they are frequent enough to warrant further examination. In fact, the epigraph to this chapter is from the short story “I’ve Always Loved This Place,” which could be categorized as belonging to the mode of magical realism. The story features the Devil and his demon secretary, Duane Fork, as they are plotting ways to remodel Hell to make it more horrible. After talking about what gruesome acts they could do

to cowboys, Duane asks if this will apply to the ranchers as well. It is to this that the Devil answers: “Nah. Nothing here would bother *them*” (*Fine Just the Way It Is* 41), suggesting that ranchers already have a tough enough life and that Hell would not be any worse for them. It is interesting that this pessimistic outlook on the ranchers’ lot can be found in several, if not all, of Proulx’s short stories, even the ones that do not necessarily exhibit elements that point in the direction of naturalism. With this and a few other Wyoming stories, then, Proulx’s writing enters into the realm of magical realism, a realm that goes beyond the topic of this thesis. Still, this epigraph proves to be a good starting point for the discussion that will follow, since most of Proulx’s Wyoming stories – including those I have selected – are about ranchers and their difficulties of trying to make a good life for themselves in a harsh environment.

It seems clear that regardless of what category we might try to impose on Proulx’s short stories, the function of landscape and geography remains the same. Weltzien argues that a “common readerly impression [is] that Wyoming itself emerges as the protagonist in this fiction” (100). Whether one agrees with this statement or not, it attests to the fact that descriptions of landscape and geography are granted much space in Proulx’s writing. It becomes clear that the landscape, geography and weather these characters are exposed to serve as contributing factors in shaping and limiting their lives. Weltzien further argues that: “They [the characters] never fit well. Landscape looms large – ‘looms’ is the right verb here – and characters rarely rise to its challenge, instead emerging as small, invariably beaten up by it” (102). I do not necessarily agree with his comment that the characters “never fit well,” because I believe that some of them do. For one thing, there is a distinction between the characters that are born to this place, and the characters that are outsiders trying to make it in Wyoming. This term “outsider” is one Proulx herself uses, as in “Man Crawling Out Of Trees”: “The woman at the post office, herself an outsider, said, ‘Oh, they’ll accept you up to the fence, but they’ll never let you open the gate” (*Bad Dirt* 115). The attitude towards

outsiders presented here is one that most Wyomingites share, as I will refer to later in the chapter. Weltzien observes that, “Mostly, Proulx peoples her landscape with losers: characters lacking sufficient imagination or will or money or luck to create alternative lives in their chosen place” (104). I can agree with him when he says that her characters lack money to create alternative lives for themselves, but not that the characters lack will. It is not necessarily for lack of trying that these characters do not manage to better their lives. What is more prominent is the fact that no matter what these characters try to do, they are thwarted by circumstances they cannot control. This chapter will be focused on exploring different circumstances that determine the characters’ lives, such as geography, weather and climate, economic forces, and the characters’ strong connections with their homes.

### **The Impact of Changes Brought by History**

Proulx’s interest in history, already discussed in Chapter One, is continued in her Wyoming Stories. Asquith argues about *Postcards* that: “Despite such local detail, Proulx’s scope remains epic [...]” (24), and the scope of her Wyoming Stories is equally epic. These stories offer a unique look into the rather harsh history of the state of Wyoming. The stories I have chosen to comment on cover an extended historical period as they offer glimpses of the state’s history from homesteaders trying to make a living in Wyoming to the more recent vacationers that buy up old ranches to use as vacation homes. These stories all share one thing in common, and that is that no matter when, where or why one tries to settle and make a home in Wyoming, the geography, weather and other conditions will be equally harsh. The characters are not fully in control of their own lives and factors such as economy, history and geography greatly limit their choices.

The short stories I have chosen to comment on reflect this grand sweep of history. In “Them Old Cowboy Songs” we meet Rose and Archie, a newly-wed and very young couple

that buy a private lot of land in Wyoming in 1885. In the first couple of pages of this story, it seems as if this might actually be a couple that makes it: “There is no happiness like that of a young couple in a little house they have built themselves in a place of beauty and solitude” (*Fine* 50). But the epigraph to the short story prepares the reader for a different outcome, and it functions as a grey cloud that looms over the story: “There is a belief that pioneers came into the country, home-steaded, lived tough, raised a shoeless brood and founded ranch dynasties. Some did. But many more had short runs and were quickly forgotten” (*Fine* 47). This epigraph also conveys the central idea of the text, namely that the homestead experience was hard and difficult, and that it is usually the success stories that have been handed down, and not the stories of the ones that fail, because, as the epigraph to the story suggests, they are “quickly forgotten” (*Fine* 47). This is the fate that eventually meets both Archie and Rose. Archie dies of pneumonia and Rose dies during childbirth. It is their neighbor, Tom Ackler, that finds Rose’s body, mutilated as it has served as sustenance for a weasel during the long winter. Tom rides to the stage station to tell people, but they are more interested in their own affairs. Tom rides back home and buries Rose the next morning. However, it does not take long before he, too, forgets both Rose and Archie: “The following spring as he rode past their cabin he saw that frost heaves had tipped the stone over and that the ridgepole of the roof had broken under a heavy weight of snow. He rode on, [...] wondering if Gold Dust [his cat] had made it through again” (*Fine* 77). After only a year Tom has forgotten Rose and Archie and the promise of the epigraph is fulfilled. In this story the reader is presented with a homestead experience that “had a short run” and was indeed “quickly forgotten” (*Fine* 47).

The homestead past is also mentioned in the short stories “Pair A Spurs” and “What Kind of Furniture Would Jesus Pick?” Both of these stories are set in the present time, but offer their own sweep of history when we learn that both the ranch belonging to Gilbert Wolfscale and that of Car Scrope were initially homesteaded by their forbears. These stories



deal with the difficulties of ranching in Wyoming, and they also offer an insight into the more recent developments, with the intrusion of outsiders who come to Wyoming to buy up ranches to use as vacation homes. The historical development outlined in the texts suggests that what used to be a ranching state is now increasingly becoming a state where people choose to live recreationally. The stories I have selected almost constitute a timeline of Wyoming state history, at least with regards to inhabitants and their livelihood.

Proulx's grand sweep of history is noticeable both in her story collections and taken as a whole within some of the stories. This is the case with the fairly brief short story "Job History," where protagonist Leeland Lee is forced to change occupations frequently. However, the text suggests that it is not up to Leeland if or when he has to change jobs. This is clear when Leeland is forced to quit his first job as a gas pumper at a local gas station:

The federal highway program puts through the new four-lane interstate forty miles south of highway 16 and parallel with it. Overnight the tourist business in Unique falls flat. One day a hundred cars stop for gas and oil, hamburgers, cold soda. The next day only two cars pull in, both driven by locals asking how business is. In a few months there is a FOR SALE sign on the inside window of the service station. (*Close Range* 92)

Leeland has no control over his own fate, because as an unskilled worker, he is an easy victim of changing socio-economic situations. After the gas station is forced to shut down, Leeland has to find new work. This happens time and again in the course of the story, and Leeland tries a number of jobs, like raising hogs, driving a truck, or starting his own businesses. A link can be made here between Leeland and Loyal, as both of them are very persistent in trying to change their lot, trying to find new kinds of work and make a living. "Job History" suggests the same idea that was presented in *Postcards*, that it is not a given that if you only work hard you will succeed. This could be interpreted as a commentary on a fundamental American

ideology, ingrained in the American Dream, and these two texts offer a far more deterministic and bleak outlook on the question of human agency.

Throughout the story there are several brief references to historical events, and they could be argued to signal the passage of time. The historical events, whether heard on the radio or seen on the news, are mentioned as a by-note in the text. The effect is that it seems like time is flying by, the world is changing, but Leeland's life still remains the same. He is still at the mercy of socio-economic changes, and he is still going from job to job, never able to make a good living for himself and his family. The historic events, whether it is a reference to "hundreds of religious cult members [that] have swallowed Kool-Aid and cyanide" (*Close Range* 93), suggesting the 1978 Jonestown Massacre, where members of the Peoples Temples committed mass suicide by drinking a soft drink mixed with cyanide, or to the twenty-fourth Super Bowl, played on January 28 1990, they function as a timeline in the story.

Towards the end of the story, Leeland's wife Lori has died of breast cancer and Leeland has been forced to change jobs a couple of more times. The story ends with Leeland getting a job as a line cook at a café, and the story ends with the comment: "Nobody has time to listen to the news" (*Close Range* 98). Because no one has time to listen to the news, the time of the ending of the story cannot be pointed out, and it seems as if this becomes insignificant. No matter what year it is, Leeland's struggles continue, and his life never gets any better. The timeline of this eight-page-long story stretches from 1947, when Leeland is born, until well after 1990, which is the latest year mentioned. The fast pace of this story signals that time is always passing us by, and in Proulx's world, it passes her characters by as they struggle for survival, pitted against forces of circumstances, economy, and environment. This and other Wyoming Stories, just like *Postcards*, draw attention to how changing socio-economic conditions through time have a determining influence on people's lives.

## Geographical Determinism in Wyoming

The Wyoming Stories differ from *Postcards* in the sense that the limiting effects of geography and environment play a more obvious role. The geography of Wyoming to a great degree shapes and conditions the characters, both directly with regards to climate and weather but also with regards to the kinds of occupations these characters can have. Before going further into the discussion of geographical determinism in the Wyoming Stories I will comment briefly on what has already been said about this particular strand of determinism. Weltzien, who writes about the Wyoming Stories in his essay on geographical determinism in Proulx's writing, but without focusing much on the stories I have chosen to comment on, observes that, "The *Wyoming Stories*, which foreground weather, suggest in variable measure the futility or doom of resistance. Setting's foreground status relegates characters to a background in their own destinies" (100). True, setting is given much space in Proulx's Wyoming, but as a deterministic force that has formative influence on characters rather than relegating them to the background. The environment has a lot to do with how characters' lives pan out, but the focus is directed as much on the characters in this environment as on the environment itself. As we will see in the discussion below, several of the characters try to improve their lot, but in the end they lose.

Hal Crimmel writes about geographical determinism in Proulx's first short story collection, *Hearts Songs and Other Stories*, and suggests that the collection "reveals one of the author's most enduring themes: the profound – if destructive – effect of physical geography and climate on individuals and communities" (64). This statement could be expanded to include the Wyoming Stories as well, and to some degree *Postcards*. Crimmel here points to an important aspect with regard to this thesis, as physical geography and climate arguably are factors that limit, condition and control Proulx's character. He further points to the fact that the term geographical determinism was "popular among geographers in

the early decades of the twentieth century” (63). This could serve as a further example of how ideas about human nature and the human condition that can be detected in her fiction parallel the ideas that often occupied the naturalists. Crimmel further observes that, “In the last decade, however, writers such as Jared Diamond, in his acclaimed *Guns, Germs and Steel* (1997) have forced us again to think about the ways in which the physical environment, with its climatic patterns, natural resources, and disease organisms, have profoundly shaped individual cultures and individuals alike” (63).

While Diamond is a professor of geography, he has done work in the academic fields of physiology, evolutionary biology and biogeography. On his personal website he addresses the question of what geographic determinism means. When it comes to the term geography, Diamond argues that, “Geographic factors mean physical and biological factors tied to geographic location, including climate, the distributions of wild plant and animal species, soils, and topography” (Diamond). He further clarifies that culture, history and individual choice play a big part in what he calls “human phenomena,” but that many scholars denounce the importance of geography when considering factors that contribute to the shaping of human lives. He further explains that there are several reasons for this denouncing of geography, but that geography is an important contributor and should be discussed more thoroughly. One reason he puts forth as to why geography is discarded is that “many people yearn to believe that the human spirit, free will, and individual agency are the noblest expressions of being human and have broad scope” (Diamond). Proulx’s writing could be said to counter this trend of disregarding the importance of geography.

As mentioned in Chapter One, Proulx is interested in landscape and place, and this is clear in most, if not all, of her writing. In the story “Them Old Cowboy Songs” it becomes clear that the environment in which Archie and Rose live, contribute to, if not cause, their downfall. The first reference to geography in this story holds the same function as the

epigraph to the story, predicting doom: “Archie and Rose McLaverty staked out a homestead where the Little Weed comes rattling down from the Sierra Madre, water named not for miniature and obnoxious flora but for P.H. Weed, a gold seeker who had starved near its source” (*Fine* 47). This is presented as the first sentence of the story and the descriptions that follow are of such a hopeful nature that it is possible to believe that this will be a happy story: “It was pleasant to sit in the cool of the evening with their feet on the great stone and watch the deer come down to drink and, just before darkness, to see the herons flying upstream, their color matching the sky so closely they might have been eyes of wind” (*Fine* 48). The scene is idyllic, but a reader acquainted with Proulx’s writing knows that this cannot last. It is possible to argue that the text at first renders a description that romanticizes the pioneer experience, but the idyll soon passes: “By spring both of them were tired of elk and venison, tired of bumping into each other in the little cabin. Rose was pregnant. Her vitality seemed to have ebbed away, her good humor with it [...]. It was hot in the cabin, the April sun like a furnace door ajar” (*Fine* 56).

The idyllic homestead experience starts unravelling after Archie is laid off from work. Archie is forced to leave home to look for work, and he finds work at a ranch. Rose is left behind with orders to go to her parents before the baby is due. The baby comes early, and Rose’s labor takes four days before “the python relaxed its grip and slid off the bloody bed, leaving her spiraling down in plum-colored mist” (*Fine* 65). As blood is gushing down her thighs, Rose feels the need to bury her child. She drags her dead baby and her dying body outside, digs a hole with a silver spoon, buries her baby and drags herself back into the log house. The passage ends with a disturbing image: “Barrel Mountain, bringing darkness, squashed its bulk against the window and owls crashed through, wings like iron bars. Struggling through the syrup of subconsciousness in the last hour she heard the coyotes

outside and knew what they were doing” (*Fine* 66). Rose dies and Archie has no way of knowing what has happened to his family.

Life as a ranch hand proves difficult for Archie, and the weight of the tough environment seems to contribute to its hardships: “December was miserable, one storm after another bouncing in like a handful of hurled poker chips, and January turned cold enough to freeze flying beards dead” (*Fine* 68). As a direct consequence of this, Archie suffers from pneumonia and a co-worker has to take him to Cheyenne. The weather conditions works against them on their journey and they are forced to stop at a line shack and wait out the weather, but to no avail:

A serious blizzard and fatal cold began to slide down from the Canadian plains that night, and when it broke twelve days later the herds were decimated, cows packed ten deep against barbwire fences, pronghorn congealed into statues, trains stalled for three weeks by forty-foot drifts and two cowpunchers in a line shack frozen together in a buffalo robe. (*Fine* 73)

From this passage it becomes clear that the forces of nature are overwhelming. The epigraph to the introduction to this thesis springs to minds as Rose and Archie are indeed victims of a “dangerous and indifferent ground,” that cares nothing for the endeavors of humans, and their fate is an example of the “misadventures” that befall many of those who try it in this environment.

In the short story “Pair a Spurs” we meet Car Scrope, owner of The Coffeepot, “an o.k. little ranch but it passed down to Car Scrope in bad times” (*Close Range* 165). This fact is presented to us fairly early in the narrative and sets the mood for the doom to come. Ranching is made increasingly more difficult for Car due to circumstances such as weather and climate, as evident very early in the story:

Scrope's yard flooded, a mile of highway disappeared under a foot of water while they held his mail at the post office, but before it ebbed another storm staggered in from the west and shucked out six inches of pea hail, a roaring burst that metamorphosed into a downpour, switched back to hail and finally made a foot of coarse-grained snow. Two days later the first tornado of the season unscrewed a few grain elevators from the ground. (*Close Range* 166)

The weather never lets up, and before the ranchers can start mending the mess the last storm created, something new happens. The weather conditions are overwhelming. This horrid weather has severe consequences for the ranchers: "The bodies of dead stock emerged from fading drifts, now you don't, now you see em, a painful counting game for ranchers flying over in single-engines" (*Close Range* 166). Throughout the story the reader is reminded of the threat and immediacy of the weather, as when Mrs. Freeze says, "Weather comin'" after looking at "the wind scratched sky." This causes Car to say, "What else," suggesting that the ranchers are used to these difficult conditions (*Close Range* 197). The weather is not the only obstacle that Car and other ranchers face, evident in Car's contemplation that "it's all hard times in this business. You was smart to get out" (*Close Range* 167). The weather in itself is not decisive for what happens to Car and his ranch, but it works as a contributing factor in making life difficult for him.

In "What Kind of Furniture Would Jesus Pick?" we follow another rancher, Gilbert Wolfscale, as he tries to make a living on his ranch: "It kept getting drier and drier, grasshoppers appearing as early as April and promising a plague in August. The grass crackled like eggshells under his feet. There was no color in the landscape, the alkali dust muting sage, grass, stones, the earth itself" (*Bad Dirt* 67-68). The overwhelming drought is suggested to last for months. The story conveys that weather and climate are factors that these characters cannot control; they greatly limit their choices and have both economic and social

consequences. Because of the drought, Gilbert is struggling on his ranch: “The shortage of grass and hay forced him to cut back on his cattle. He didn’t have enough hay to feed his own stock. Everything told him that the day of the rancher was fading, but he dodged admitting it” (*Bad Dirt* 68-69). This illustrates that geography plays a limiting and shaping role in these stories, and that it is a contributing factor in determining the lives of the characters. The fact that, “Everything told him that the day of the rancher was fading [...]” is a powerful comment, as the reader is presented with several examples throughout the story of how true it is that traditional ranching is coming to an end.

The fact that this is an arid region is common knowledge to a Wyomingite: “It had always been dry country, and no one born there expected more than a foot of annual rainfall in a good year” (*Bad Dirt* 68). Gilbert’s ranch has been in his family for generations and has experienced drought before. The family has taken precautions to lessen the effects of the climate, but to little effect: “In the drought years of the 1930s and again in the ‘50s, his father had put in earthen dams and stock ponds, and in wet years they had held water but now were silted up and dried and stood as unsightly pits filled with weeds” (*Bad Dirt* 69). No matter what the characters try to do so as to even out the effects of weather and climate, these natural forces still hold the upper hand. This could be considered an example of the little room left for agency in this fictional world. Gilbert does not simply surrender to the environment; he tries very hard to make changes to improve his chances, but in the end he is overpowered by a harsh environment and the forces of nature. The land almost emerges as a character of its own and this personification makes it seem as if it has a will that goes against human development: “The country wanted to go to sand dunes and rattlesnakes, wanted to scrape off its human ticks” (*Bad Dirt* 68). In passages like this one it is easy to see what Weltzien suggests when he argues that in Proulx’s fiction, “The focus remains first on the presentation and anatomy of landscape – its power and indifference – and second, on the lines of accommodation



characters pursue or fail to pursue, within it” (101). This powerful imagery of humans as “ticks” is not a feature we see in all of her stories, but it serves to show the mere force of the climate and explains the extreme nature and effect of the drought.

Even in the fairly short story “Job History,” where the rendering of landscape does not receive as much attention as in the majority of the stories, it is still mentioned alongside other issues that determine what happens to the protagonist, Leeland: “One intensely cold winter when everything freezes from God to gizzard, Leeland and his father lose 112 hogs. They sell out” (*Close Range* 93). Due to this climactic condition, Leeland loses his business and is forced to find a new occupation. The fact that weather and climate play such a determining role even in this very brief short story only serves to prove the importance of the setting in Proulx’s writing.

### **Old-Timers and Newcomers**

Some of the Wyoming Stories seem to suggest that there are characters that are born out of this landscape, or that they evolve with the land, becoming more and more adapted to its harsh environment. This falls in line with what Crimmel observes when he says that critics have noted how Proulx’s characters “are often directly shaped by their setting” (64).

Characters in these stories are conditioned by their environment, and it becomes clear that this has a determining effect on their lives. Characters that are conditioned and brought up to a harsh way of living have a better chance of surviving in Wyoming, and some short stories make a point of differentiating between those born there or accustomed to the reality of Wyoming, the insiders, and those moving to the state, often to buy a vacation home, the outsiders. In these stories we find the same idea as in *Postcards*, namely that people tend to be conditioned by the place they are born into. Because the characters of the Wyoming Stories

are born to this place, they are conditioned by it, and therefore also more likely to be able to manage in the harsh environment.

This idea is evident in the description of the female characters Mrs. Freeze and Inez Muddyman in “Pair a Spurs.” Mrs. Freeze is the female foreman at Car Scrope’s farm, and she is described as a “crusty old whipcord who looked like a man, dressed like a man, talked like a man and swore like a man” (*Close Range* 169). The only evidence of Mrs. Freeze being a woman is the irritation she feels when her breasts are in the way of her roping. As Mrs. Freeze is characterized by a working mate, she is “[t]ough as they come and good as a man” (*Close Range* 193), and the text makes a point of stating that she is brought up in an all-girls family where they were taught to “ride and rope and ranch, ever one a them” (*Close Range* 194). Inez also comments on Mrs. Freeze’s nature when Inez sees how filthy Car’s kitchen is. Mrs. Freeze apparently does not mind and Inez “wondered how Mrs. Freeze could crush womanly concerns so thoroughly that it didn’t bother her” (*Close Range* 183). Mrs. Freeze was brought up to do what was considered a man’s job, and because of her occupation, she is shaped and conditioned to best fit outdoor needs.

The same argument can be made for Inez. She has also been raised to be suited for this difficult life: “Scrawny and redheaded, a little savage with an early change of life, Inez Muddyman had been one of the Bibby girls and raised, as she said, on a horse from breakfast to bed” (*Close Range* 171). A point is made that “off a horse she was awkward and stave-legged, dressed always in jeans and plain round-collared cotton blouses stained light brown from the iron water” and, “In the bathroom cabinet next to Sutton’s kidney pills stood a single tube of lipstick desiccated to chalk in the arid climate” (*Close Range* 171), suggesting that Inez also has to, or chooses to, omit certain female attributes that are not needed for her way of living. A similar comment can also be seen in “Man Crawling Out of Trees,” in the

description of Mrs. Conckle, Eugenie and Mitchell's neighbor: "She seemed made from sagebrush and rock herself" (*Bad Dirt* 102).

The fact that these characters adapt to the harsh reality of living in Wyoming is a good starting point for a discussion of insiders versus outsiders or old-timer versus newcomer. Several short stories suggest that there is a difference between the characters born to or shaped by this environment, and those that are just visiting. This distinctive divide between insider and outsider is evident in negative remarks such as "the Eisenhower era of interstate highway construction that changed Wyoming forever by letting in the outside" (*Bad Dirt* 65), and the fact that the outside was allowed in harms some of the characters. This idea is also represented in the character Inez. Inez and Sutton run a dude ranch, and because of this they meet a lot of visitors to the state. It is through their dealings with their guests that we can see that the ignorance of the outsiders has fatal consequences for Inez and Sutton's lives. For instance, the "New York women lawyer dudes" that visit their ranch have been ordered, by Sutton, to always either carry a cell phone, "or hold on to a long string attached to the porch rail, a rule laid down in the wake of a grass fire set by a strayed guest who had depended on smoke signals to show his whereabouts" (*Close Range* 188). No local resident of Wyoming would have thought it wise to start a fire in such a dry place.

The women lawyers from New York get lost and Inez rides out to find them and guide them back to the ranch. The women are sure that they saw a wolf, because one of the lawyers claims to know wolves, as she once had a case where there was a wolf involved. Whether they actually saw a wolf is not clear, but when Inez rides out to find the lost lawyers she spots a female wolf: "To her right in a clump of rabbitbrush a large female wolf appeared" (*Close Range* 190). Inez attempts to capture the wolf, and the text suggests that this action is both unwise and unplanned: "Without thinking she uncoiled her rope, made a loop and threw" (*Close Range* 190). The wolf scares Inez's mare which "bucked violently," and "Inez went

through the windshield, landed on her chin and skidded, neck broken, mouth open, lower teeth plowing red dirt” (*Close Range* 190). Whether Inez and the New York ladies actually encountered a wolf becomes a topic of discussion: “Local opinion discounted the dudes’ identification of a wolf as eastern hysteria; it was no wolf but a dog loose from some tourist’s camper” (*Close Range* 191). The tone of the text is mocking when the lawyer Glacken insists that she knows what she is talking about because she has seen a wolf on tape but never in real life. Nevertheless, Inez meets her end because she needs to rescue the lost New York women.

The short story “Man Crawling Out of Trees” is arguably a pivotal story when it comes to depicting outsiders in Wyoming. This story is about Mitchell and Eugenie Fair who relocate from New York to Wyoming. Their sense of Wyoming and concerns regarding life there differ drastically from those of local ranchers. A good example is when one of Mitchell’s main concerns is that, “It was a hopeless chore, trying to keep the car clean” (*Bad Dirt* 100). The text repeatedly ridicules Mitchell and Eugenie, as when the first thing they decide to do is buy all the clothes they think they need from a “Western Wear store.” Mitchell buys himself new boots and “stumbled a lot, unable to get used to high heels” (*Bad Dirt* 107). Eugenie is nearly shot by a hunter because she was out walking in the woods during hunting season and was not wearing any orange and “might briefly resemble a deer” (*Bad Dirt* 113). She does not tell Mitchell about this incident, “because he had remarked several times that it was hunting season and they ought to get orange vests” (*Bad Dirt* 114). But instead of actually buying the equipment needed for safety reasons, Mitchell only suggests that they “ought to” get them.

Mitchell’s fascination with the pronghorn functions as another contrast between Mitchell and other Wyomingites. Mitchell sees these as “supreme athletes of the animal world which had evolved on the high plains over 20 million years along with wolves and bison” (*Bad Dirt* 109). These thoughts that Mitchell have is ridiculed when we find out that a part of

Mitchell's fascination with these animals is that, "their coloration – a reddish brown accented by sparking white – reminded him of a pair of golf shoes he had once owned" (*Bad Dirt* 109). Mitchell even tries to find his old golf shoes, "to see how closely the golf shoes had resembled pronghorn" (*Bad Dirt* 110). This serves to show that Mitchell's priorities are different from those of Wyoming residents in other stories.

These examples serve to illustrate that Mitchell and Eugenie are outsiders in Wyoming, and this is also something that the local residents easily notice. Their neighbor Eleanora Figg, a woman who "loathed environmentalists and people from somewhere else," noticed just by looking at their car that they were "sybarites who dined on camel heels and foreign olives," in other words outsiders (*Bad Dirt* 111). New Yorkers are uncommon in Wyoming, something Mitchell and Eugenie's real estate agent points out: "We don't get New Yorkers here. Not their kind a place, I guess" (*Bad Dirt* 109). Weltzien comments briefly on this short story and argues that, "With Mitchell Fair, Proulx provides one of her least satiric portraits of a transplant trying to discover his niche, find solace in open spaces" (109). My reading of this short story offers a different view, because as I have argued above I see it as highly satiric. However, there is a tension in the text between irony and sympathy towards the ignorance and lack of knowledge presented in Mitchell and Eugenie. The comments above on their lack of knowledge and wrong priorities create a distance from the characters common in much of Proulx's writing. At the same time, the use of focalization where the reader experiences Mitchell and Eugenie's hopes, fears and anxieties creates sympathy for them as characters. Mitchell and Eugenie are conditioned by the life they have always had in the city, and therefor do not know the social codes of Wyoming or have the knowledge needed to make it there. This is exemplified when Eugenie breaks "the cardinal rule of the country – that you give aid and help to a stranger, even your bitterest enemy when he is down" (*Bad*

*Dirt* 122). They do not have the local knowledge that is needed, since they are not of this place.

Mitchell and Eugenie soon realize the difficulties of living in Wyoming and we can see more clearly that they are not accustomed to this way of living:

Wyoming had seemed civilized when they first moved out, but gradually evidence appeared that forced them to recognize that they were in a place people in the east would regard as peripheral to the real world. There were disturbing proofs that the weight of a harsh past still bore down with force. Every few months something inexplicably rural happened [...]. Everything seemed to end in blood. (*Bad Dirt* 110)

This passage emphasizes that after the initial gloss this new place offers, the harsh conditions of Wyoming start presenting themselves to Mitchell and Eugenie and they start realizing that this place is not for them. They are not accustomed to living in a rural place, not equipped to deal with the accidents and random events that can occur. Eugenie and Mitchell lack the will to cope and adapt to the harsh conditions of Wyoming, and they also lack the perseverance of characters seen in the other Wyoming Stories and the same perseverance seen in Jewell and Loyal in *Postcards*.

Due to Mitchell and Eugenie's poor marriage, Eugenie eventually leaves Wyoming to go back east while Mitchell stays behind in Wyoming. But it is made clear that there is a difference between the life Mitchell has in Wyoming and the life of the ranchers that are born and bred here, and the text suggests that Mitchell does not fit in. The ranchers living here are holding on to their ranches and their livelihood for dear life because they have no other options. Mitchell realizes this, as "He imagined poor old ranchers working themselves into early graves holding on to their places" (*Bad Dirt* 107). Ironically, several of the ranchers are, if not working themselves to death, at least working so hard to keep their ranches afloat, at the expense of everything else; wives, children, friends and family.

Several of the short stories comment on this difference between making a living in Wyoming and buying property there to be used either as a vacation home or for other recreational activities. The same happened to part of the Blood family farm in *Postcards*, which was sold to Dr. Witkin, a dermatologist from Boston. In several of the Wyoming stories, ranches are bought by wealthy outsiders looking to fulfill the same dream “of wilderness experience” as Dr. Witkin. In “Pair a Spurs” Sutton decides to sell his ranch after Inez dies. The new owner, Frank Fane, “played a Jupitorean warlord in a science-fiction television series but preferred the western theme in private life” (*Close Range* 191), and renamed the ranch Galaxy Ranch. Fane is a wealthy actor who “stocked the place with cutting horses and hired a crew of Texans” (*Close Range* 191), but his experience of Wyoming is drastically different from that of those who are trying to make ends meet. We can see the same development in “What Kind of Furniture Would Jesus Pick?” where Gilbert’s neighbors are replaced by people who buy a ranch to use as a vacation home: “To the new-moneyed suitcase ranchers who had moved inn all around him – ex-California real estate agents, fabulous doctors, and retired cola-executives – the Harp [Gilbert’s ranch] looked a skanky, run-down outfit” (*Bad Dirt* 68).

If we turn back to Proulx’s interest in history, the development of ranching presented in these short stories suggests that this is a profession that is slowly being phased out. In “Pair A Spurs” and “What Kind of Furniture Would Jesus Pick?” especially, we are presented with two ranchers that are faced with the challenge of adapting to changing times. In addition to the geographical difficulties, they are struggling against economic forces. In “Pair A Spurs,” Car is faced with the danger of economic ruin: “The beef-buying states, crying brucellosis which they fancied cattle contracted from Yellowstone bison and elk on the roam, had worked up a fear of Wyoming animals that punched the bottom out of the market” (*Close Range* 165). In addition, “There was a deeper malaise: all over the country men who once ate blood-rare

prime, women who once cooked pot roast for Sunday dinner turned to soy curd and greens [...]” (*Close Range* 165). Both circumstances present a challenge to a rancher who is dependent on selling beef to make a living.

Faced with similar economic challenges Gilbert in “What Kind Of Furniture Would Jesus Pick?” tries to improve his lot by taking measures to make his ranch more profitable. It becomes clear that no matter what he tries, it fails: “He thought of butchering and packing the beef himself to bypass the middlemen, who took the money while the rancher did the work, but the local stores preferred to stay with the chain supply” (*Bad Dirt* 64). A lonesome rancher operating on his own cannot compete with big businesses that can produce and sell merchandise for a cheaper price. Gilbert tries to start raising turkeys instead of beef, “but people wanted the plastic-wrapped, prebasted Safe-way turkeys with breasts like Las Vegas strippers” (*Bad Dirt* 64), and again Gilbert cannot compete.

These examples serve to show that Gilbert’s and Car’s ranches are at the mercy of economic forces and circumstances that have made traditional ranching obsolete. The fact that both Car and Gilbert are pestered by outsiders that only want to buy their ranches to use as vacation homes can serve as an example of how the ranching profession is being phased out. Gilbert gets a rude awakening to the reality of his life when he realizes that time has passed him by, and that his profession as a rancher is slowly being made redundant by larger businesses and is dying out. After visiting his son in the city, Gilbert is forced to wait for the Fourth of July parade to finish before he can drive home. He sits in his truck and watches as the parade goes by:

Behind the band came two teenage boys dressed as Indians [...]. Now came two horses, both bearing kids dressed as cowboys [...]. They were followed by a stock outlaw and a sheriff’s posse, and behind them half the town’s women and small children in pioneer regalia [...]. The last of all was a CPC pickup, three hard-hatted



methane gas workers sitting in back smoking cigarettes and joking with one another.

(*Bad Dirt* 85-6)

After he has seen the parade, Gilbert cannot drive on and sits almost paralyzed, feeling that, “There had been something wrong, something seriously wrong” with the parade (*Bad Dirt* 86). What he eventually realizes is “that there had been no ranchers in the parade – it was all pioneers, outlaws, Indians and gas” (*Bad Dirt* 86). The characters represented in the parade have somehow managed to inscribe themselves, either historically or mythically, as significant to the nation. The ranchers, however, have not, and Gilbert painfully becomes aware not only that his way of life is becoming obsolete, but also that a chapter of the history of the West appears to have disappeared from public memory. The reader comes to this realization at the same time as Gilbert. To Gilbert, this signifies the end of an era, and the painful hard realization that time has passed him by and the world has moved on.

### **Connection to Place: “a strangling love tattooed on his heart”**

John Agnew starts his essay on the “Space: Place” binary by giving a brief distinction between place and space: “[...] space is general as opposed to the particularity of place, [...] place is lived or experienced” (Agnew, “Space: Place” 81). Agnew observes that theorists have often treated these terms as binary, an either-or, and he argues that while recent thought emphasizes a separation of the two terms, “each needs to be seen as invariably depending on the other” (82). In his introduction to *American Space/American Place* Agnew proposes a definition of space and place:

Space signifies a field of practice or area in which a group or organization [...] operates, held together in popular consciousness by a map-image and a narrative or story that represents it as a meaningful whole. Place represents the encounter of people

with other people and things in space. It refers to how everyday life is inscribed in space and takes on meaning for specific groups of people and organizations. (5)

This explanation brings out how place is constructed by the people who inhabit it, and the way in which “everyday life is inscribed in space” is a clear focus of attention in Proulx’s writing. Place is understood as lived space, and the experiences of characters who make a place their home are inscribed into that place. As already noted, several of the characters of the Wyoming Stories are formed by their connection to place, and this function as a strong force that has formative effect on the characters and inhibits them from leaving.

The harsh realities surrounding Proulx’s Wyoming characters begs the question: why not leave? It is possible to see a connection to home and to place in some of the Wyoming characters that parallels that of Loyal in *Postcards*. The characters in the Wyoming Stories are so tied to their home and their place that they cannot leave. They are, in essence, as rooted as Loyal was to Cream Hill, Vermont, and the difference is that these characters are not forced to leave. No matter how hard life is for them, due to different circumstances, their ties to their home represent a factor that prevents them from leaving.

In “Pair a Spurs,” Car’s connection to his ranch almost borders on a “morbid passion,” something he had acquired “as a child when he believed he could hear its grass mocking him” (*Close Range* 167). Car inherited the ranch from his father, and in the following passage we can see that Car is not interested in modernizing the ranch or looking ahead:

Scrope’s old man had built the log ranch house after World War Two, and the son had changed nothing, not the faulty plumbing with its mineral-clogged pipes, nor the rusty porch swing that had stained Jeri’s flowery skirts [...]. A photograph of the ranch taken in 1911 hung above the table [...]. It had been there so long Scrope couldn’t see it, yet was aware of it in the same way he was aware of oxygen and daylight – he’d notice if it was gone. (*Close Range* 168-69)

Car's view of his ranch and his home is more one of nostalgia than advancement, and this can be linked to his almost morbid passion for his farm. This attitude works against Car and prevents him from making the necessary changes his ranch needs. At the beginning of the story, Car is "forty years old, had lived on the Coffeepot all his life and suffered homesickness when he went to the feed store in Signal" (*Close Range* 167). This emphasizes Car's close ties with his home, but it also shows that he has never been anywhere else.

Like so many other ranchers in these stories, Car is lonely, and this actually contributes to his rootedness. Car stays at the Coffeepot despite his loneliness: "He couldn't bear the loneliness but the place had its claim on him and there was no leaving unless through his brother's door" (*Close Range* 201). It is implied earlier in the text that Car's brother committed suicide. Car's wife, after cheating on him, leaves Car and his life starts to unravel. Throughout the story there are several references to Car as being a victim to his sexual desire, because every time he is near a woman "the rank animals was out of him an in the open" (*Close Range* 185). This contributes to his downfall as he alienates his ranch hand, Mrs. Freeze. Towards the end of the story Car has lost everything, having neither friends nor family to help him. It is possible to draw a parallel between Car and Loyal when it comes to being driven by their sexual desire, and the suggestion that internal drives control characters can be found in other Wyoming Stories as well.

The strong connection to place and the determination to continue a life in Wyoming are expressed through the characters of Inez and Sutton Muddyman. As mentioned above, Inez and Sutton run a dude ranch, which is another word for a guest ranch that caters to visitors. However, the text expresses that dude ranching is something they do out of necessity and not choice: "Sutton Muddyman [...] claimed dude ranching was hard work made harder by the need for intense and remitting cheeriness, and although he and Inez weren't suited to the constant company of urban strangers it paid the bills and brought them more Christmas

cards than they could open” (*Close Range* 170). Inez and Sutton are not suited for the constant company and intense cheeriness that being the owners of a dude ranch requires, but it provides an income when traditional ranching fails. What this short story eventually brings out is that the characters either have to change with the times and adapt to new ways of ranching, find a new way to make a living, or move away, or they will eventually be broken by the harsh conditions surrounding them. As mentioned, Inez dies largely due to her own disbelief, when she has to rescue the New York ladies and does not believe they have seen a wolf. Her husband Sutton sells their ranch after Inez dies and moves to Oregon. Car does not change or move, and in the end, his stubbornness, combined with the harsh environment and forces of nature eventually break him.

Gilbert Wolfscale in “What Kind of Furniture Would Jesus Pick?” is also strongly connected to his home. Gilbert is described as “a model of rancher stubbornness, savagely possessive of his property. He did everything in an odd, deliberate way, Gilbert Wolfscale’s way, and never retreated once he had taken a position” (*Bad Dirt* 65). That Gilbert is possessive of his property can be seen in his refusal to sell off parts of his ranch, and this is also where we can see the root of his connection to place. Gilbert is aware of the fact that ranching is hard, and not very lucrative work: “He was conscious of how many things could go wrong, of how poorly he’d reckoned the ranch’s problems” (*Bad Dirt* 68). However, when approached about selling his ranch, Gilbert “could see in their eyes how they planned to bulldoze the house and build mansions with guest cottages. Guest cottages seemed reprehensible to him” (*Bad Dirt* 68). Gilbert also has the same family connection to his home as Car has in “Pair a Spurs.” This can be seen in Gilbert’s refusal: “I told him, my granddad homesteaded this place [...]” (*Bad Dirt* 68). The fact that the ranch was the home of Gilbert’s ancestors explains his connection to the place.

Gilbert's connection to his home is so strong that he believes that his two sons are doomed "to grow up without a father's guidance and example, injured because they were denied a boy's life on the ranch" (*Bad Dirt* 70). His sons have taken no interest in the ranch and this shows that Gilbert's ranch is becoming increasingly insignificant, both in a historical context and his private life. Gilbert's own connection to his home is so strong that he believes it should be everyone's dream to live on a farm:

His allegiance to the place was not much of a secret, for even outsiders perceived dimly his scalding passion for the ranch, the place he had lived all his years. His possessive gaze fell on the pale teeth of distant mountains [...]. His feeling for the ranch was the strongest emotion that had ever moved him, a strangling love tattooed on his heart. It was his. (*Bad Dirt* 71-72)

The fact that Gilbert's connection to his place is described as "a strangling love" emphasizes that this connection has a formative effect. Gilbert's connection to place that metaphorically strangles him prevents him from realizing sooner that the days of the rancher are passing. The hard work needed to keep a ranch afloat is not recognized by the public or the nation. The fact that Gilbert, like his ancestors before him, has lived here all his life only contributes to his stubbornness when it comes to sticking it out in this place and not moving on to somewhere else. It seems that it is not his sons that are doomed, but Gilbert himself: "By the end of the century, Gilbert was fifty-five and caught in the downward ranching spiral of too much work, not enough money, drought" (*Bad Dirt* 67). Here we get the sense that his wife was right to leave when she did. Her observation on ranch life seems to be a good enough reason to leave: "You know I put in years on that ranch, and nothin really worked right" (*Bad Dirt* 70). This emphasizes the difficulties of making it both in Wyoming, and as a rancher.

It also becomes evident that Gilbert's strong connection to home clouds his judgement and causes him to be blind to the difficulties facing his ranch:

And although the margins of Bull Jump Creek had been trampled bare and muddy by generations of cows, although there were only one or two places along it still flushed with green willow, the destruction had happened so gradually he had not noticed, for he thought of the ranch as timeless and unchanging in its beauty. It needed only young men to put it right. (*Bad Dirt* 72)

The words “timeless and unchanging” and “he had not noticed” indicates that he does not register how time has passed him by, leaving its mark of decay on the ranch itself. After his wife and sons leave him, Gilbert lives on the farm with his mother and manages the ranch on his own. His sons only reluctantly visit him every now and then, and Gilbert feels they are disconnected from the ranch and fears that “he would never be able to pass on how he felt about the land to them” (*Bad Dirt* 71). This could serve as an example of how Gilbert’s connection to this place is also rooted in the fact that his parents and grandparents have all been dependent on and made a life on this ranch. When his sons are uprooted fairly early in life they lose this connection, and because of this they have no trouble leaving it behind.

After the Fourth of July parade, Gilbert realizes that life on the ranch is not the dream he has thought it to be. The parade functions as an eye-opener for Gilbert, making him realize that the way of life he has held on to has become an anachronism. This becomes clear in the last passage of the story, where Gilbert wishes that his mother was still alive, so that he could tell her: “One thing sure. He wouldn’t get hisself tangled up with no ranch” (*Bad Dirt* 86). This attitude of despair is one that is arguably present in all the short stories discussed above, and as is the case in most of Proulx’s Wyoming Stories, this attitude stems from the difficulties of working and living in this place.

The epigraph to this chapter functions as a good indicator of how Proulx describes Wyoming. For the ranchers, the experience of making a living here is comparable to being in hell. As we have seen, Proulx’s Wyoming characters are exposed to unmanageable

conditions, and natural forces hold a strong hand and in effect control the characters. Many attempt to change their lot but to no use. Several of these stories also convey the message that the life of the rancher is gradually dying out. The small ranches are not able to keep up with the times, fewer are interested in ranching as a profession, and primary industries lose the competition with conglomerate businesses. In a sense, the ranchers are doomed from the start, because even if they manage to deal with the overwhelming and difficult environment of Wyoming, they still need to be able to make a living from their ranch, something these short stories suggest is not that easy anymore.





## Conclusion

He [Wendell Berry] is talking about the knowledge of a place that comes from working in it in all weathers, making a living from it, suffering from its catastrophes, loving its mornings or evenings or hot noons, valuing it for the profound investment of labor and feeling that you, your parents and grandparents, your all-but-unknown ancestors have put into it. (Stegner 205)

Annie Proulx succeeds in creating a strong sense of place in her writing, in that her characters are very much tied to their places. The epigraph to this conclusion is from Wallace Stegner's essay "Sense of Place," and his words express a connection to place that it is possible to see in Proulx's characters. If we were to compare the sentiment expressed in this passage to what we find in texts by Proulx, however, it becomes clear that it is possible to find both contrasts and similarities. The characters of both *Postcards* and the *Wyoming Stories* can be said to share knowledge of their places, knowledge they have acquired by having worked and cultivated the land in "all weathers" and suffered greatly "from its catastrophes." Stegner also points to an historical dimension that suggests that a knowledge of and a connection to place is established through a generational tie to the home, a feature that, as argued above, only contributes to a stronger attachment to place in both *Postcards* and the *Wyoming Stories*.

However, Stegner's statement holds at its core a feeling of nostalgia towards place, a loving relationship that differs from Proulx's rendering of place. The difference lies in comments such as "loving its mornings or evenings or hot noons" and "valuing it for the profound investment of labor" (Stegner 205). As seen in the discussion on her novel and stories, this is not the feelings Proulx's characters are left with. Rather, her characters are almost destroyed by their connection to place. Her characters feel the strong connection to place described in the epigraph, but at the same time her texts offer a distant, or an outsider's, perspective. This could come from the fact that Proulx is an outsider to the places she writes

about. Proulx's places are storied by someone who sees them from a distance, which makes it possible to regard her characters with both sympathy and irony.

Stegner observes that, "What Frost did for New Hampshire and Vermont, what Faulkner did for Mississippi and Steinbeck for the Salinas Valley, Wendell Berry is doing for his family corner of Kentucky [...]" (205). To this we can add what Proulx has done with Wyoming, but it is possible to add other places and regions that are the setting of other works from her hand, most notably New-England and Newfoundland. Arguably, Proulx is an author that devotes much time to the accurate rendering of place and we can therefore add her to this canon of authors engaged in creating a sense of place. Proulx devotes part of her article "Dangerous Ground" to authors devoted to their places and writes that, "A sense of place based on regional landscapes [...] dominated American perceptions and writing until recent decades" (6). She also writes that "novels and stories rooted in and sustained by deep landscape have become dangerous ground. Even the minor use of place to control and move the story seems in decline" (22). As argued throughout this thesis, place is extremely important to Proulx and it functions as both a moving and controlling factor within the stories.

This thesis has not been concerned with categorizing Proulx as a regionalist or a neo-regionalist writer, something other critics have suggested. Proulx cannot be identified with just one particular region, as her novels and short stories are set in different places, from New England and Newfoundland to Wyoming and Texas. *Postcards* covers several places, after Loyal leaves his home in Vermont and travels all over western America. The places Proulx writes about are not "her" places, she is not of the places or regions she describes, as many of her characters are. Writing about the "golden age" of landscape fiction in America, Proulx offers her own thoughts on using landscape to shape and control the story. She argues that, "This use of landscape as a massive presence in a novel to shape and control the content, direction, plot, and the characters' psychological profiles distinguishes it from mere

regionalism [...]” (“Dangerous Ground 7). As argued in Chapter One, it would be easy to argue that Proulx is an author who uses landscape in the way she describes here, something that, according to the author herself, “distinguishes it from mere regionalism.” In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, conducted by Robert J. Hughes, Proulx explains why *Fine Just the Way It Is* will be her last work set in Wyoming: “partly because I want to avoid the regional-writer label.” These examples serve to show that calling Proulx a regionalist without further problematizing the term can be troublesome.

If Proulx is to be called a regionalist writer, a label that does not quite fit and that she herself resists, perhaps it would make more sense to go along with Hunt who refers to Proulx as “critical regionalist,” as mentioned in Chapter One. Hunt argues: “For while she is known for her writing of real places, her representation of them is often fictionalized and exaggerated [...], so that we can see the differences clearly. Proulx warns us as readers not to be duped [...] into map-gazing reverie, into romantic escapism” (“The Ecology of Narrative” 184). This comment could arguable be said to confirm Proulx’s outside perspective, and to emphasize her unique rendering of place. At the same time as we see the characters’ strong sense of and connection to place, we also witness the difficulties, harshness and formative effect the place has on the characters. As Hunt observes, we “see the differences clearly.” Proulx’s rendering of Wyoming and Vermont is not a romanticized one, even her characters may feel a romantic attachment to place. This exemplifies the duality it is possible to see in her evocation of place, that even if her characters have the same sense of place evoked in Stegner’s quotes used above, the distance of the narrative voice makes it possible to render this also with an outside perspective.

Proulx’s regions, then, are depicted through distant observations of the processes that have made these places what they are. Often seen through scrutinizing eyes and with a focus on how historical, both socio-historical and socio-economic, circumstances shape and mold

the region, Proulx offers a unique view of how characters fit into their regions. She does this by drawing on ideas of determinism. In the same way that Proulx can be associated with a literary trend of creating a strong sense of place and be said to contribute to the storying of a place, she can be associated with the trend of “geographical determinism.” As we have seen, especially in the *Wyoming Stories*, her characters are shaped by, and also in a sense controlled by, the environment that surrounds them. But, as discussed throughout this thesis, characters are also determined by several other circumstances not bound up with place, such as heredity and a changing socio-economic and socio-historical condition.

In the discussion of the *Wyoming Stories* the focus has been on the determining relationship between humans and the land they inhabit. The environment the characters are exposed to function as a limiting force that controls how their lives pan out. Their strong sense of place also has a formative effect on the characters, as they are conditioned by their places, their surroundings, be it rural or city landscapes. As mentioned, geographical determinism is much more pronounced in the *Wyoming Stories* when compared to *Postcards*, even if this novel also exhibits traces of this trend. In *Postcards* the focus is more on the fact that the characters are pre-determined, by for instance heredity. Loyal is forced to leave his home, after he unwillingly kills Billy. Loyal is uprooted from his home and from this point he never finds a place to settle down and remains homeless throughout almost the entire novel.

Historical factors and socio-economic changes influence the characters of both the *Wyoming Stories* and *Postcards*. As already noted, Proulx’s interest in history is transposed into much, if not all, of her writings. A common theme in these writings is that the characters are in a sense bypassed by time. Most of them are holding on to ways of life that are dying out. Whether it is ranching, farming, or other occupations Loyal ventures into, these are professions that are gradually being taken over by bigger businesses or are becoming obsolete. Wendell Berry writes about the fate of the farmers in his article “Conserving

Communities.” When writing about the fact that the United States Census Bureau would “no longer count the number of Americans who live on farms,” Berry says: “American farmers, who over the years have wondered whether or not they counted, may now put their minds at rest: they do not count. They have become statistically insignificant” (9). The fact that farmers “do not count” exemplifies the end result of most of the characters discussed throughout this thesis. They have all worked in primary industries; farming, ranching or other occupations tied to the land. In the end, they have all become insignificant, and more often than not their homes, traditionally the basis for their livelihood, have been turned into vacation homes or trailer parks. The message is clear: the farms and ranches are not needed any more.

Proulx’s characters are at the mercy of circumstances and forces outside their control, and this serves to limit their choices. The fact that it seems as if these characters are not in control of their own destinies makes it possible to draw out a specific attitude or stance regarding the question of human agency. As argued in both chapters Two and Three, both *Postcards* and the *Wyoming Stories* offer an implicit critique on the notion of the American Dream. The notion that we are not in control and able to decide our own fates contradicts a basic American attitude to life, epitomized in the American Dream and stories of self-betterment. This implicit critique is not at the expense of character, but it is possible to argue that ideas linked to the American Dream and all its promises function as a circumstance that guides and informs the choices of the characters, in both *Postcards* and the *Wyoming Stories*.

The fact that Proulx’s characters are determined by different circumstances makes it possible to link her to the naturalists, as discussed in Chapter One. It has not been my intent to argue that Proulx is a naturalist, since the period of naturalism is over. Proulx is a contemporary writer, and as we have seen, what could be called a postmodern playfulness is also obvious in her writing. My aim has been to show that Proulx shares traits and certain ideas with the mode of naturalism, but that it is not a repetition of an earlier mode, it is a

refashioning of it. The ideas and currents central to the American naturalists are given a new life, in a new form, in the writings of Annie Proulx. In this regard, it is possible to consider Proulx as a neo-naturalist. The use of the term neo-naturalism creates a link to the old mode of naturalism at the same time as it emphasizes the differences, namely that Proulx is not of the period, but is interested in some of the same ideas. Pizer contends that: “The American naturalistic novel has not had a single dominant form or shape but rather several recurring forms among novels of different periods, a characteristic which suggests the existence of certain fundamental fictional responses to the naturalistic impulse” (*Twentieth-Century* 151). This emphasizes that the ideas central to the naturalists have resurfaced in “different periods,” but also that the form has changed and adapted to new currents of writing. This serves to show that Annie Proulx could easily be considered as an author who is interested in the same ideas that occupied the naturalists and that she contributes to the revitalization of the mode.

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